MAFIA
AND
TAKEN
A MARCHIANO MAFIA ROMANCE
ISA OLIVER

MAFIA AND TAKEN

ISA OLIVER

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This book features an Italian Mafia dark romance.

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DEDICATION

For Biggo, Browny, and Blacky, for inspiring the scene with Mr. F on the plane. A huge thank you to Zui and Mihaela for all the beautiful picture edits you do and for the messages you send – you girls rock! Thank you also to the gorgeous Kathy T. for your support and for the lovely chats. And thanks to all the lovely Angels who support me via the Facebook group – you guys are truly awesome. And thanks, as always, to my beautiful and wonderful family xxx

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader, please note that this book is categorized as a dark romance due to some subject matter. Please see the next page if you would like further details. Love Isa xxx

Marchiano Mafia Series (all can be read as standalones):

Mafia And Captive
(A Dark Romance)
Mafia And Angel
(An Age Gap Arranged Marriage)
Mafia And Taken
(A Dark Romance)

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CONTENT NOTE: SPOILERS

Topics include:

d*bious c*nsent

mafia violence and killing

For a full content list, please see:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1req1CqhjJ2XMy_kbAWA9LvuX6vD_iC9GpZ50T1bEips/edit

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MAFIA FAMILES

Marchiano Family: Fratellanza Mafia, Chicago

Marco Marchiano (Capo) - *m: Juliana*

Alessio Marchiano (Consigliere) - Marco's brother

Camillo Marchiano - Marco's brother

Danio Marchiano - Marco's brother

Debora Marchiano - Marco's sister

Lorenzo Marchiano - Marco's cousin - *m: Anni*

Russo Family: Fratellanza Mafia, Chicago

Ovidio Russo (Captain)

Caterina Russo - Ovidio's daughter

Nonna Russo - Ovidio's mother

Tocchini Family: Fratellanza Mafia, Chicago

Alfonso Tocchini (Soldier)

Antonio Tocchini - Alfonso’s son

Carolinne Tocchini - Alfonso’s daughter

Nonna Tocchini - Alfonso’s mother

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CHAPTER 1

Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

CATE

"Caterina, it's time you were married. You're twenty-one years old now and people are starting to ask why you're not even engaged," said my father, in his usual commanding tone.

He was the only person who called me 'Caterina'. Everyone else in my life called me 'Cate'. We were eating dinner at my father's house—how I hated these weekly dinners. They were nothing like the family dinners we

had when I'd been younger—when my mom and brother had still been alive.

I clenched my fingers more tightly around my cutlery before answering my father. "Father, I don't want to marry anyone yet, especially not a Made Man."

A Made Man was what we called a man initiated into the Mafia. My father, Ovidio Russo, was a Made Man—he was a Captain in the Fratellanza Mafia here in Chicago.

As we spoke, his forehead creased in annoyance. "It's not a matter of what you want, Caterina. You know that in our world you are expected to marry to further the strategic bonds of your family and, just as importantly, to provide heirs for the Fratellanza."

So, there we had it. I was expected to spread my legs to carry on the distinguished line of Made Men in the Fratellanza.

"Father, you know how I feel about our world and what goes on in it—"

"You've made your feelings quite clear, which is why I have allowed you to have a job and live in your own apartment since you turned eighteen." My father's irritation had made him interrupt me in a harsh tone. "Most families and fathers would not permit those freedoms to their daughters, especially to the daughter of a high-ranking Captain."

Although it was unusual that my father permitted me to live in my own apartment, his soldiers still kept watch over me and guarded me closely every day, even when I went to work each day as a teacher's assistant in kindergarten.

My father pierced me with his gaze. "Now it is time for you to do your duty."

Duty. I was sick of hearing that word. It was used as an excuse for everything in our world. For business, for crimes, for murders. Anything could be justified in the Mafia by declaring it to be a duty.

“I have been approached by another Fratellanza Captain. He is looking for a bride and I think you would make a suitable match. After all, you are the daughter of a Captain and understand the responsibilities that come from being part of such a family.”

I felt like shouting out that I wouldn’t do it, but my mom had brought me up to be polite at all times, no matter the situation. Even though she was gone now, I didn’t want to let her down. I answered as calmly as I could, “Father, I’m not ready to marry anyone just yet.” And when I did marry, I definitely wouldn’t be marrying someone from the Mafia world—I’d seen firsthand how it could only lead to tragedy and heartbreak.

“Caterina, you’re twenty-one years old. In the Mafia world, the ‘two’ at the front of your age means that people expect you to be married by now or, at the very least, engaged. People are beginning to talk.” To not be engaged by the age of twenty was scandalous in our world.

“They are just a bunch of gossips,” I blurted out. “All they do is talk about the nearly-weds and the newly-deads. The women in the Fratellanza like nothing more than to speculate about who might be promised to who, and which families are trying to unite through strategic marriages. They haven’t got anything better to do.” I couldn’t help the bitterness seeping into my words.

My father pierced me with his gaze. “Your mom was married long before your age. She was married to me by the time she was seventeen.”

That sounded scarily young to me. “Father, I want to choose my own husband when the time comes, not be told who I am to marry.”

“You know that arranged marriages are the usual method of matrimony in our world, given that we do not marry outsiders. We don’t let anyone else into our circle. It is far too dangerous to let in people who do not understand our ways and the Mafia’s codes of honor.”

Every Saturday, I was required to attend dinner with my father at his house. My grandmother, Nonna, was normally at these dinners, but this week she was visiting her sister in Florida. I was missing not having Nonna here tonight to fill in the awkward silences and to act as a buffer between my father and me. Without her presence, my father was hounding me even more than usual.

Coming here once a week meant that my father left me alone for the remainder of the week. I just had to get through this meal without having an argument with him.

I looked down at my outfit. I was wearing a shift dress and heels. My father expected me to dress formally for dinner, rather than in the more casual clothes that I preferred. I wore my auburn hair loose over my shoulders and had applied some light makeup—just some eyeshadow, mascara around my hazel green eyes and some pale lip gloss.

“As Nonna isn’t here, I was thinking I wouldn’t stay the night like I normally do and skip church in the morning.”

After dinner here each week, I would stay the night before going to church with my grandmother on Sunday morning. Then I was free to go back to my apartment and my life for another week.

“Nonsense. You will stay the night and I will go to church with you tomorrow.”

I suppressed a sigh. I wasn’t sure what the point was of my father going to church. He wasn’t particularly godly in his beliefs, and it would take him

at least a decade to confess all his sins.

After we finished our meal, I excused myself, saying I was tired and wanted to go to bed. My father went into the drawing room, but I always avoided that room as much as possible because on the mantelpiece were my mom's and brother's ashes.

The ashes had been there since I'd been fourteen years old. Just seeing them always brought a lump to my throat as memories of my mom and brother would come flooding back to me. My mother had always wanted to be cremated so that her ashes could be scattered back in her homeland. My father wouldn't allow me to do this by myself, and he had never gotten around to scheduling time for us to make the trip together—as always, work was his sole priority and came before everything else for him.

I climbed the stairs to my childhood bedroom. It was still the same since Father had not changed it after I moved out three years ago and Nonna kept it as clean as a whistle.

I took a long shower before putting on a strappy satin nightgown that fell just above my knees. I climbed into my childhood bed and pulled the covers up to my chin, but it took ages to fall asleep as always.

This house no longer felt like my home—it hadn't felt like my home since I'd been fourteen years old. But I blocked all those memories from my mind. I couldn't go there tonight.

I watched the stars outside my bedroom window, seeking comfort from their light in the darkness, and eventually I fell asleep.

***

I woke abruptly to loud voices coming from downstairs. Squinting into the darkness, I checked the clock and saw that it was after 2 a.m.

Father must be talking to some of his men. They sounded angry with him, but it was odd for someone to raise their voice at my father since he was a Captain.

For some reason, the loud voices made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I decided to go downstairs to check with my father that everything was all right.

This house always made me feel uneasy now, but the loud voices were making me more nervous than normal. I reached for my robe. It was thin, but it would cover up my nightgown.

I silently crept down the stairs toward the voices coming from the drawing room. That was strange as well since my father conducted business in his office at the front of the house.

I slowly approached the drawing room, catching sight of my father surrounded by several men dressed all in black with their weapons drawn. My heart started to race.

They weren't Fratellanza. *They were the enemy.*

How had they gotten past the soldiers guarding the gate? If these men were in our home, that could only mean that our soldiers were dead.

And that meant that the intruders probably wanted to kill us too.

I suddenly felt cold, but at the same time felt a bead of sweat trickle down my back, making me shiver. My father was pleading with the intruders. "Please, Dmitri, it wasn't anything to do with me, I swear!"

The man he was talking to raised his gun to my father's head.

I cried out. The man with the raised gun turned and saw me.

And seeing the look on his face, I didn’t think. I just ran.

I had a petite frame and ran to keep fit, so I was quick on my feet. I raced toward the front door, but another man dressed in black was coming through that door.

I spun on my heel as I made for the stairs in the opposite direction. There was a bathroom near the top of the stairs, and it had a lock on it. I only had to get that far.

I grabbed the wooden handrail, leaping onto the first step and rushing up the stairs.

I urged my legs to move faster but it felt like my whole body was moving through deep water. The man who had seen me was behind me—he was chasing me.

I stumbled on the stairs. I used my hands to push my body up and forward. It sounded like the man was close to me and I could hear his heavy breaths right behind me.

But I didn’t have time to look around behind me. I had to keep moving forward if I was to get away from him.

I had gone up and down these stairs so many times during my childhood but my ascent up them had never felt so difficult. I was breathing in huge gulps of air as I saw the top step come into my line of sight—only three more steps to go, two more steps.

Then I felt my foot touch the top step.

Once I reached the landing I didn’t pause for breath. I turned back on myself and bolted for the bathroom. Despite being fit from my regular running, my breath was coming in short pants and my body felt jittery.

I made it into the bathroom, whirling around and pushing the door shut at the same time.

The door bounced off a man’s hard body.

In slow motion I saw the face of the man as he came toward me.

With each step he took toward me, I took a step away from him trying to keep him from me until my back hit the bathroom wall and there was nowhere left for me to go.

His face snarled as he looked at me. I didn’t recognize him.

But he knew who I was. “Cate Russo...you’re even more beautiful than I had imagined.”

His complexion was pale, and his hair was light brown. The slight trace of an accent in his voice made a shudder run through my body.

He was Russian—which must mean that he was *Bratva*, part of the Russian Mafia. My father had called him Dmitri. This could only be Dmitri Petrov, head of the Chicago Bratva.

I was standing still but my breaths were coming in heavy gulps and needles of terror were piercing my skin.

He reached out his hand toward me. I tried to push past him but his arm caught my body and his other hand yanked my head back with a violent tug at my hair.

I cried out as pain ripped through my scalp and neck, but he held my head back at an awkward angle and forced me to look at him, into eyes which were dark and menacing.

I saw his hand moving toward me from the corner of my eye. “Oh Cate, how I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

As I tried to scream, he forced a damp cloth against my mouth. I struggled against his hand smothering me, fighting the sickly chemical smell that was threatening to overwhelm me.

But it was no good.

The chemical was taking over the air I was inhaling, slowly stealing me away from my body and making me fall down into a deep black hole of unconsciousness.

ALESSIO

I faced my brother, Marco Marchiano, in the kitchen of the mansion we shared.

“Ovidio Russo’s men have alerted me that he didn’t show up for a meeting this morning and the soldiers at his home weren’t answering their cellphones. They checked his house and the two guards there had been shot dead.”

“What happened?” Marco growled. Marco was twenty-seven years old and Capo—the boss of the Fratellanza. I was a year younger than him, and I was his Consigliere—his second-in-command and chief adviser.

“They checked the security footage from the house and grounds—it was the Russians. Dmitri Petrov was there.”

Marco frowned as he considered what I had said for a minute. “What the hell?”

“Well, I’m thinking that both us and the Russians have been having problems with bad drugs over the last few months. It’s strange for us both to have the same problem, at the same time, given that we have completely different drug suppliers.”

We’d been having problems with bad drugs. Someone had mixed some shit into our drugs, and the resulting impure product had caused numerous deaths, meaning that we now had the FBI sniffing around us.

“Go on,” said Marco.

“Ovidio oversees our drug shipments when they arrive, so he has access to all our drugs. Now it appears that he is also involved with the Russians in some way, otherwise why would they take him? So, it seems that Ovidio is the common denominator in this whole story. The Russians have recently started having the same problem of bad drugs in their supply chain, causing lots of deaths too among the drugs they sell.”

Marco understood now and summed up my theory. “Goddamnit, if he’s been diluting our drugs with some other shit, that would increase the overall weight of the drugs. Then he could sell the extra weight to the Russians, making himself a tidy amount of money on the side.”

I nodded. “He might have gotten away with it if the drugs hadn’t started causing so many deaths, alerting the Russians and us to the fact that there is a problem with the chemical makeup of the drugs.”

Marco grimaced. “It seems like he got greedy.” He shook his head. “Traitors always eventually get tripped up by their greed.”

“What are bad drugs?” asked our younger sister, Debi, who had come into the kitchen.

“Nothing for you to worry about, shortcake,” I said gently. We always shielded our fourteen-year-old sister from the details of our business. Of course, she knew what we did, but I would protect her from the more sordid aspects for as long as I could. “Why don’t you take the dog out for his walk?”

“Okay, Alessio. Come on, Mr. Fluffy, do you want to go for walkies?” The dog didn’t need to be asked twice, and he started barking excitedly, bounding toward the door to the garden.

I waited for Debi to go outside before carrying on. “We need to get Ovidio back, to find out what he’s been up to, who else is involved, and then to deal with him ourselves. Plus, the security footage also shows that his daughter was taken too. Ovidio’s men told me she’s twenty-one and her name is Caterina.”

“Why on earth did they take the daughter?” asked Marco. “The Bratva don’t usually target the families.”

“The CCTV from the house shows Dmitri Petrov asking Ovidio where the money is and saying something about the daughter’s bank account.”

“Christ. Well, it looks like we need to talk to the girl as well. The whole family might be involved in this shitshow.”

“I’ll get on it right away.”

I went to the office to start work on tracking down Ovidio and his daughter. My blood was boiling like a blazing inferno—we expected absolute loyalty from our men, and nothing else was acceptable. The whole Fratellanza was built on this.

For a Captain to betray us was shocking, but even worse, it made me wonder how many other traitors were lurking among the Fratellanza.

Upon the death of our father, Marco had taken over as Capo at the age of eighteen, and I had been seventeen when I became his Consigliere. We had taken over an organization that was fraught with infighting and corruption, and it had taken many years and us working our asses off to turn it around into the success it was today.

Betrayals and treachery had the potential to bring the whole organization down, and I would do whatever was required to prevent that, dishing out whatever retribution was required to set an example to the rest of the Fratellanza.

My brothers and I were known as the Kings of Chicago. Our family hadn’t gotten to its position today by being careful and respectful of others—we had gotten here through brutality and being merciless.

I couldn’t even think about Ovidio Russo without my insides churning up with fury. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on our deceitful Captain and anyone else he had been working with. The adrenaline started to course through my veins as I thought about the punishments we would dish out, about the violent ends they would meet.

For her sake, I hoped the daughter wasn’t involved in any betrayal.

Because even if she was a girl, the Fratellanza treated all traitors the same.

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CHAPTER 2

CATE

I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids were so heavy like I was struggling to wake from a deep sleep. My head was pounding, and my mouth felt dry.

I could feel movement around me, as if we were in a moving car, perhaps. I didn't know what was going on, but my head was hammering too much to even think. I must be dreaming, I thought, letting the drowsiness take over.

But then I heard that voice again. It was the voice with the accent—the man my father had called Dmitri. Dmitri Petrov. I had never seen him until today, but even I had heard the name of the most feared Russian in Chicago.

I forced my eyes open, and panic engulfed me as I remembered what had happened. I tried to say something, but my brain was all foggy and I could

only manage a low moan.

The car stopped and a blast of cold night air rushed in as the doors were ripped open. Dmitri pulled me out of the car and marched me towards a warehouse on a derelict industrial estate while another man dragged my struggling father. I saw that his mouth was gagged, and his hands were tied behind his back with zip-ties.

After we entered the warehouse, Dmitri tugged me along as he crossed the building, and I stumbled as I struggled to keep up with him.

He reached down, grabbed my arm, and hauled me to my feet before continuing toward his destination. He opened another door, and I felt a coldness penetrate my bones as he led me down a set of stone steps into a basement. The smell of damp stung my nostrils and the iciness in the air made me shiver.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.” He didn’t give anything away.

“What do you want with me?” I pleaded.

He pushed me up against a wall. I felt the cold of the brick seep through my thin nightclothes.

“What do I want from you? Oh, the things I want to do to you…What do you think you could do to please me, to make me go easy on you?”

I shuddered.

He ran the back of his fingers across my cheek. “I could torture you...But what I really want is to see you on your knees in front of me with my cock stuffed in your mouth, begging me to spare you.”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Have you ever sucked a cock?” he smirked. “Oh, angelic Cate, I know you haven’t, which will make it all the sweeter when you suck mine. After

all, the Fratellanza keep all their daughters as pure virgins until their wedding day, to make it all the more satisfying to finally break them in, don't they?"

I tried to swallow the terror balling in my throat, but I felt a tear betray me and slide down my face.

"Will your pussy get wet when your tongue wraps around my cock?" His harsh laugh echoed in the emptiness of the building. "I can't wait to find out."

He seized my arm and I couldn't stop the scream from leaving my mouth.

He pushed me onto a hard chair, binding me to it with my arms tied behind me, the coarse rope cutting into my wrists and legs. I struggled to try and stop him, but I was no match for his strength.

"I like seeing you all tied up. No need to gag you though—there is no one to hear you and I want to hear all your screams."

I looked up and saw my father being dragged down the same steps and taken off into what looked like a different room further along. He was still fighting, trying to get out of his restraints.

I could see the fear in my father's eyes. Not much frightened him—he was a Made Man and was used to violence and death, but this was different. I didn't know what the Bratva wanted with us, but it could be nothing good.

Dmitri walked away to the room my father was taken into. My head was pounding, probably due to the drug they had used on me, and I was so tired. I forced my eyelids to stay open—I needed to work out a way to escape from here.

My mind raced, trying to work out how to get away from these men but whatever way my mind turned, I could see no way out.

I was powerless in this situation, and I needed to figure a way out of here; eventually, however, my mind blurred with a fog of wooziness and exhaustion, and I couldn’t stop my eyes from closing.

***

The next time I woke, it was to the sound of a deep scream in the distance. I opened my eyes and held myself very still as I tried to figure out where the sound had come from.

Then I heard it again. It was my father. Terror crawled over every inch of my body–they were torturing him. But why? I tried to move, but I was firmly bound to the chair. My arms ached having been tied down for a long while by now. I wasn’t sure how long I had been there.

As I saw Dmitri approach me, I tried to sink back against my chair. Perhaps I should try to distract him from whatever he had in mind for me. “May I use the bathroom, please?” I wasn’t sure why I was being so polite to him, but it was my usual manner and I didn’t want him to refuse.

He looked at me for a minute without answering.

He took a knife and came back toward me, his gaze fixed on me. The look in his eyes said he wanted to do something to me, and that thought made me shudder.

He slowly cut the ropes open, freeing my body. My legs were shaky as I tried to stand up. His hand roughly gripped my arm, and he dragged me forward and up the stairs. The restrooms must be on the ground floor, I thought to myself.

As we climbed the stairs, I suddenly jerked to a stop as I heard loud bangs—gunshots.

Dmitri ran up the remaining steps to the ground floor, shouting over his shoulder, “Stay here!”

He didn’t try to tie me back up—I guess he thought that even untied there wasn’t much harm a girl like me could do to anyone.

The screaming had stopped from the next room. I didn’t know whether that was a good sign or not.

I wondered if I should try to escape. This might be my only chance while the Russians were distracted by the gunshots. I decided not to give myself time to think but to go with my gut.

I ran up the stairs and was almost at the top when the door burst open and one of the Russians appeared in front of me. He frowned as he saw me, but this was my chance now and I pushed past him.

My legs were still shaky and numb after being bound up for so long. He grabbed me but I tried to push his arm away.

Somehow, I lost my footing and felt myself fall back. My foot couldn’t find the step. I tried to grab the handrail—it was just out of my grasp.

There was nothing for me to hold on to and I felt myself falling down the hard concrete steps. As I tumbled down one stair after another, each was another harsh blow to my body, sending sharp pains searing through me.

But I didn’t care about the pain. All I could think was that my chance to escape was slipping through my fingers.

That was my last thought before my head hit the hard ground. There was a moment of intense pain, then everything went black.

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CHAPTER 3

ALESSIO

We had tracked down the Russians to this warehouse through a combination of hacking into the Russians' cellphones and gaining illegal access to street camera footage. My youngest brother, Danio, was a computer genius and could get us access to all sorts of things.

If Ovidio Russo was indeed siphoning off some of our drugs and selling them to the Bratva, he deserved to be left to be tortured to death by them. However, we needed to find out the extent of his dealings with the Russians and what his daughter's involvement was—then we could decide their fates.

Marco and I had come to the warehouse with our soldiers. The Bratva were a tough opponent; however, we had the element of surprise on them.

After getting past the Russian soldiers on the ground floor of the warehouse, there was no sign of Ovidio or his daughter.

I turned to our men. “Split into two. Half search the top floor and the other half search the basement level.”

Marco went with some soldiers to the top level while I headed with the remainder of our soldiers to the basement level.

I held my weapon close to my body as I made my way down the steps to the basement, checking my surroundings for any more of the enemy. My gaze immediately caught sight of the still figure lying at the foot of the stairs.

It was Ovidio’s daughter—the girl that was likely involved with him in his betrayal.

I heard noises coming from somewhere in the basement. I signaled to my soldiers to carry on toward where the noise had come from while I stayed to check the girl. She was lying on her back with her head turned to one side, her hair covering her face.

I knelt down beside her and smoothed her auburn hair back from her face. I could see the rise and fall of her chest—she was still alive.

The thin nightgown and robe on her body were torn, and her skin was cold to my touch. I checked her over for broken bones. There were no obvious breaks as I ran my hand over the soft contours of her body.

I heard a low moan and as her body stirred, her torn nightgown fell open, exposing her full breast and a rosy pink nipple that had hardened in the cold, dank atmosphere of the basement.

Her eyes fluttered open, revealing exquisite hazel eyes that were an alluring combination of green and amber. When she saw me, her eyes widened with panic. “D-don’t touch me,” she cried, trying to push my hands away. She forced the words out, even in her weak state.

“It’s okay, we’ve got you now.” I watched the frown on her forehead smooth out in relief.

She thought I was her savior. She didn’t realize that we knew what her father had been up to and her likely involvement.

I saw one of our soldiers heading back toward me. I didn’t want anyone looking at her in her semi-naked state. I took off my leather jacket and quickly laid it over the girl.

The soldier gave me an update. “Boss, Dmitri Petrov and a couple of his men have gotten away, but we have the remaining Russians rounded up. Ovidio is still alive although he’s been tortured and is in bad shape. Two of our men have also been injured and need medical attention.”

I nodded at him and then looked back at the girl, but she had drifted back into unconsciousness.

Marco came down the steps into the basement, and I updated him. “Ovidio and the girl are still alive, although he’s been tortured and the girl needs to see a doctor too.”

“Okay, take them back to the garage block on our estate and we’ll question them there,” responded Marco.

The garage block was not just a normal garage. It was where we took people to torture information out of them.

From the front, it looked like a normal garage and matched the modern white exterior of our mansion. Behind the cars parked in it, however, was another door leading to our interrogation rooms.

“I’ll take the girl with me,” I said, scooping her up into my arms. She felt so fragile.

I couldn’t forget, however, that she was a possible traitor. In fact, she had the perfect guise—no one would suspect a Mafia daughter of being

involved in this sort of treachery.

As I wrapped my arms around her petite frame, I heard a whimper escape from her lips. I looked down at her face—she was obviously hurt and in pain.

But I knew that would make no difference to my treatment of her.

I carried her up the stairs and out of the warehouse to my SUV and laid her on the back seat before getting in beside her. I told one of my soldiers to drive the vehicle so I could stay in the back with her.

Marco would take Ovidio in his vehicle. Ovidio had been beaten badly but I felt no pity for him. It was unlikely he was innocent in this whole charade. Once we had gotten what we needed from him and his daughter, they would pay for their deception and betrayal.

As our SUV moved off, I decided to give the girl a more thorough check. I pulled out the medical kit that we kept in every vehicle, and as I felt her head for any cuts or bumps, I enjoyed the softness of her silky strands between my fingers. I noticed that she kept drifting in and out of consciousness, indicating that she might be suffering from concussion.

I noticed the bruises and scrapes on her arms and, more worryingly, around her throat. Her translucent skin had been marked at the hands of the Russians, and that thought stirred up more anger in me.

She belonged to the Fratellanza, and the Russians had no right to touch her.

CATE

I squinted as I felt a bright light being shone into my eyes, but it was hard to close my eyes because someone was holding them open.

The blackness in front of my eyes was lightening to a gray. I opened my eyes more widely to find myself looking up at a man who was checking my injuries.

I felt his fingers running through my hair, gently massaging my scalp. I'd recognized him inside the warehouse. He was Alessio Marchiano—the second-in-command of the Fratellanza. I had never spoken to the man, but I had seen my father speaking to him on a few occasions.

"You've got a bump on your head. I'll get the doctor to look at it." His voice was like a velvet caress.

The relaxing rhythm of his fingers against my scalp made me want to fall into the oblivion of sleep, but I fought to stay awake and focused on the man in front of me. Even though we were sitting down, I could immediately sense that he was tall and strongly built. I looked up at his hands checking me over, noticing his strong wrists, olive skin, and the dark hair that trailed up his muscled arms.

Thank God he'd saved me from the Russians. I shuddered at the thought of what would have happened to me at their brutal hands.

When he looked down at me, my eyes flitted over his almost-black hair and rich brown eyes.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I'm taking you home."

I breathed a sigh of relief. All I wanted to do was to be back in my own apartment. Back in the safe life I had built for myself away from this violent Mafia world.

I looked down at myself. A leather jacket was covering up my torn clothes. It hurt when I breathed; it hurt all over, my eyes ached, and my ears were ringing. Just being conscious hurt. “My father?”

He looked at me with narrowed eyes. “We’ve got him as well.”

But he didn’t say anything else about my father. His jaw was set in a hard line, and I felt like his dark eyes were searing into me. I felt unease prickle through my body. I had a bad feeling that my father had done something very wrong.

My father seemed to know our kidnappers. They certainly knew him and were determined to get some answers out of him—by torturing either him or me. As a Mafia daughter, I had been shielded from the finer details of our violent world, but even I knew that our kidnappers were the Bratva.

As the SUV turned a sharp corner at speed, I winced as my sore body was thrown against the car door.

“Take it easy with the goddamn driving,” I heard Alessio bark at the driver. But all too soon, he drove around another bend, and I let out a cry as my badly bruised arm hit the passenger door.

“For God’s sake,” said Alessio. Before I knew what was happening, he had undone my seatbelt and tugged me into his arms, setting me in his lap and holding my body against his chest.

My pulse started beating too fast as I felt most of my body in contact with his, and I was acutely aware of how little I was wearing under his jacket.

Sometime later, we pulled up outside a modern estate and I realized that he wasn’t taking me back to my own home—this was the Marchiano estate. “I want to go back to my own apartment.”

“Not yet.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“We need the doctor to check you.” He didn’t look at me as he spoke.

I wanted to argue, but I didn’t have the energy to. Everything either hurt with pain or ached with exhaustion. I didn’t even want to have to think anymore.

As we reached the perimeter gate of the estate, Alessio rolled down his window and spoke to one of the soldiers on guard. “When Dr. Cotrone gets here and is done with Ovidio, tell him that I need him to take a look at the girl as well.”

“Got it, boss.”

The SUV pulled up in front of the mansion and I gazed at the modern white house surrounded by extensive grounds. But what caught my attention was the enormous stone statue of the Virgin Mary.

It was positioned on their front lawn, the traditional statue clashing blatantly with the modernity of the house.

Italian-Americans had a custom of displaying a saint statue in their front yard. I wouldn’t have taken the Marchianos, however, as being the godly sort who would follow this tradition. After all, they spent their lives killing people—and enjoying every minute of it.

After Alessio got out of the car, I followed and attempted to stand, but as my legs gave out under me, he caught me and scooped me up into his arms.

I felt too dazed to voice anything except for a small gasp, so instead I let my body sink into his comforting hold, and I relished the warmth of his body against mine.

He was tall, easily over six feet in height, and his whole body was a machine of finely honed muscle, from his broad shoulders down to his

powerful thighs and calves. He was wearing black jeans, a black fitted top and black boots.

Black was, of course, the clothing color of choice for most Made Men—no other color hid the bloodstains so well—however, together with his almost-black hair, dark eyes and his precise movements, he gave off the aura of a highly-trained assassin.

He carried me into the garage and headed past all the vehicles and through a door leading to more rooms.

Was this a back way to enter the house? After walking past the luxury exterior of the main house, these rooms were a harsh contrast with their stark emptiness and desolate air. “What is this place?” I asked, looking around in confusion.

He didn’t bother to answer me.

He went into the first room we came to, put me down and closed the door behind him, the sound echoing with a sinister finality.

I felt unsteady on my feet, but that was the least of my worries right now.

The room felt a few degrees colder than the temperature outside. There was no heating or air conditioning, and the room only contained the bare essentials of a table, two chairs, and a storage closet.

My breath caught as the realization hit me of what this place was: the closet would be full of torture equipment.

“Why have you brought me here? What are you…you going to do with me?”

“That depends on you, on whether you cooperate.” His words were casual but hinted at something darker beneath his careful veneer.

“I don’t know anything,” I said quickly.

He prowled toward me, his proximity unnerving me. “Didn’t your parents ever teach you not to lie?” His voice was cruel now, in complete contrast to the man who had soothed me earlier, and I realized just how dangerous this man truly was.

My eyes swiftly swept around the room trying to figure a way out. My breaths were coming in shallow rasps. “I thought you came to save me from the Bratva?”

“So, you do know something—you know who your captors were.”

I desperately tried to understand what was going on. “I know that my captor is now you,” I said harshly. “And anyone would know that those other guys were Russians with the accent they had.”

“What did they want with you?” As he fired questions at me, he was rolling up the sleeves of his dark top, revealing his strong forearms dusted with dark hair.

A bead of cold sweat trickled between my breasts, making me shudder. He was a Made Man: a man who had been brought up to torture and kill, a man who had no conscience, and a man who thrived on cruelty. I should have known that he wasn’t my savior. I should have known that he was just like every other Made Man. He was a person who lived and breathed violence, and a person who could only bring pain and suffering into my life.

“I d-don’t know. I was staying the night at my father’s house and woke up to find them in the house. I don’t know what they wanted with us.”

He pierced me with his eyes, and I could sense his mind trying to figure out what I knew. “Tell me, what did they say to you?”

“Nothing, I swear. They barely said a thing to me.”

He sighed. He knew I was lying...

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CHAPTER 4

ALESSIO

She was lying.

I had dealt with enough deceit in my life to know when someone was not telling the truth.

Her body was shaking, and her eyes were wide. Her father was in a bad way, and we probably wouldn't be able to question him for a while, meaning that it was imperative that the girl talked and that she talked now.

Dealing with women was one of my least favorite jobs, but a traitor was a traitor, irrespective of their sex.

She was my captive now—and I would make her talk.

I walked toward her and watched her pretty face pale. She knew how this was going to go.

As I neared her, she tried to back away, her hazel eyes huge in her pale face, but after a few steps she came up against the concrete wall. She swiftly looked around herself and realized that there was nowhere left for her to go.

I slammed my palms on the wall either side of her petite body, caging her in. I knew what had to be done next.

But first I relished her being trapped by my body. I slowly brought my hand up to her pretty face, stroking the back of my rough, calloused hand against her face. As my skin made contact with hers, she flinched. It was going to be such a shame to ruin her pretty looks.

I cocked my head to one side, regarding her for a few moments. “Do I scare you?”

She didn’t reply, however I knew the answer. She was trembling and I could almost smell the fear rolling off her.

The darkness within me burned as the knowledge that she was afraid of me called to my primal senses. That side of me thrived on her terror, causing desire to flair through my loins. She was my captive now—mine to do with as I wished.

“What did Dmitri Petrov say when he took you?” My hand continued to stroke her cheek. “I want to know exactly what was said.” My voice was low, caressing the air between us.

Her answer was barely audible. “Nothing…he said nothing.”

My hand suddenly leaped from her cheek to her throat, pinning her against the wall. My face was centimeters from hers, my eyes burning into her irises.

“Please don’t—I don’t know what you’re looking for,” she rasped. “I don’t know anything.”

“Do you want me to force it out of you, is that what you want?”

“No, please!”

“Then stop lying to me. Otherwise, you won’t like the consequences,” I growled.

“Please…I don’t feel so good. My head’s pounding and won’t stop spinning.”

She probably had a concussion, but I wasn’t going to let her feminine pleas distract me. “The doctor can deal with it later. Now, talk.”

She wearily shook her head at me.

I should have drawn my knife at this stage.

Instead, I spun her around and slammed her back against my chest, my hand gripping her windpipe and applying pressure.

Fuck, I had wanted to avoid this. But if I had to do this, I didn’t want to see her face while I did it to her.

“What. Did. He. Say?” I steadily applied more pressure to her slender throat as I forced out each word through gritted teeth.

I could hear her gasping now, and her clammy fingers were frantically scrambling against my iron grip, trying to loosen my hold.

A hint of distaste soured my mind because I was doing this to a woman, but I also knew that was the reason why I was choking her rather than cutting her—if she came out of this, the choking would leave bruises but no permanent scars—no permanent marks to sully her beauty.

I released my hold a fraction, allowing her to gulp in a few small lungfuls of oxygen. I lowered my lips to her cheek and noticed that her flawless complexion was marred by hot tears. “Are you ready to talk now?”

“Please don’t do this!”

I tightened my grip on her throat again, squeezing her delicate throat and feeling her body writhe against mine before giving her another respite for a few seconds.

“Tell me what I want to know.”

She was sobbing. “Please…I think—”

Before she could say anything else, her body sagged, and she slumped in my arms as she blacked out.

“Damnit!” She was definitely unwell, probably as a result of the hit to her head.

Irritated, I got out my cellphone and rang Dr. Cotrone. “I need you to come look at the girl as soon as you’re done with her father. She’s passed out—it’s likely a concussion. I need her conscious ASAP to carry on my questioning.” I knew the doctor would be nearby in one of the neighboring interrogation rooms taking a look at the father.

After ending the call, I looked at her small body collapsed on the damp concrete floor. As I lifted her into my arms, she stirred and cried out as she saw my face.

“I need the doctor to look at you,” I said tersely. All this was delaying me from my task at hand, namely extracting information from her.

For some reason, something in my gut told me to take her into our house. I exited the garage block and made for the front door of the mansion, turning sideways so as not to hit her body against the door frame as I carried her inside.

I then took her up the staircase, heading for my bedroom and putting her down on my bed. “The doctor will be here soon.”

Her whole body trembled. “Is this your bedroom?”

“It is.”

“I can wait for him in the garage…” She spoke quickly as she huddled against the headboard. She probably thought I had brought her here to rape her.

“Lie down,” I ordered.

As she lay down on the bed very slowly, a wary look in her wide eyes, there was a knock at the bedroom door. I opened the door to see that the doctor had arrived and stepped out of the room to talk to him.

“I couldn’t feel any broken bones, but she has a large bump on her head and there are cuts and bruises that need looking at. When we found her, it looked like she had fallen down some stairs, but I don’t know what happened before that.”

“If you can wait out here, I’ll take a look at her now,” replied the doctor.

I felt my eyes narrow at his words. “I’ll be staying in the room while you check her.”

“With respect, Alessio, you’re not family and it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to be in the room while I examine her.”

“Fuck propriety. She’s our captive now, and I’m staying with her.”

The doctor sighed. “Fine. Let’s take a look at her now.”

I opened the bedroom door and allowed the doctor to go in ahead of me.

“Hello, Caterina. I’m Dr. Cotrone. Alessio has asked me to check you over. Is that okay with you?”

I don’t know why he was asking her that, I thought. I was in charge here and if I said she needed examining, he just needed to goddamn do it.

She gave a slight nod, and he opened his bag and took out his equipment. I listened to his various questions, and I watched while he ran his hands over her body and checked the knock she had suffered to her head.

I impatiently paced up and down the bedroom while I waited for the doctor to complete his examination. I couldn't keep my eyes off his hands which were touching her small body. I wanted to break every one of his fingers, slowly and painfully.

By the time he was finished, Cate looked to have passed out again.

But I was taking no chances.

I pulled out the syringe I had stashed in my pocket.

Removing the cover, I pressed the end into her neck. I couldn't risk her waking up during what I was going to do to her next.

As the needle jabbed into her skin, she gave a slight moan, and then the drug quickly took effect.

I pierced the doctor with a stare. "Put a tracker in her."

"Alessio," he sighed."I know we sometimes put trackers in your prisoners when you're worried about them escaping. Unlike a trained enemy, however, this girl has no chance of getting past you or your soldiers. Plus, she's a woman…" It was obvious that the good doctor was reluctant to carry out such a procedure on a female.

"She may be a woman, but she is here with great reluctance," I snapped.

He closed his eyes briefly. "Very well."

The doctor knew I wasn't going to change my mind.

"I'll need your assistance. The best spot is between her shoulder blades. I need her laying on her front."

She had only my jacket and a sheet covering her torn nightgown. I didn't want to expose her body to anyone else's eyes. I rolled her body so that she was on her stomach, all the time making sure that her body remained largely covered by the sheet.

Then, pulling my jacket part of the way down, I took my knife and sliced through the satin fabric at the top of her back, exposing her delicate skin.

The doctor got a syringe ready and inserted it in the optimal position and then covered it with a small dressing. The tracker was the size of the lead tip of a pencil and was the ideal way for me to keep control of her. I would always know where she was, and she wouldn't be able to get away from me.

The idea of having control over her made my dick stir.

She looked so helpless and vulnerable in her current state…and I liked having her powerless in my bed like this.

When Dr. Cotrone was all finished, I pulled my jacket back over her shoulders, and then I showed the doctor out of the bedroom.

"In light of your examination, what's the prognosis?"

"She has a severe concussion from the knock to the back of her head. Apart from that, it's just cuts and some nasty bruises. She also seems weak, but nothing a good meal and rest won't sort out. The emotional trauma will be harder to deal with, as you know. It's better that she has complete rest for the next twenty-four hours to get her strength back to cope with the funeral and aftermath."

Even the doctor knew that her father would be a dead man soon enough.

"You know what complications to look out for with a concussion—bleeding from the ears, problems with vision, seizures, etc. You know where I am if you need me. I've sent Ovidio to the private clinic. He has internal bleeding and needs surgery straight away. I'll see how long I can keep him alive for you to get what you need out of him."

The doctor headed for the staircase and took his leave. He was paid a lot of money for his discretion, and I knew that he could be fully trusted.

I saw Marco come up the stairs at that moment. He was scowling, but that was nothing new. He signaled to me to meet him in his bedroom which was at the other end of the hallway.

I followed him and closed the door behind us. “What the hell are you doing?” demanded Marco.

“She’s a girl.”

“She’s a potential traitor,” retorted Marco.

“She’s a Mafia daughter, and we should treat her with respect.” I didn’t even know why I had just said that. “Anyway, you won’t get anything out of her in her current state. She’s too shaken up to talk.”

“Well, I’ll shake her into talking then.”

“You’re too impulsive, Marco, charging in headfirst like always. We can do it another way.” Marco had always been impulsive in his actions, while I liked to assess the situation and think out my strategies first.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll keep an eye on her like the doctor asked. I’ll get into her head and get her to trust me, and I’ll get the information out of her like that.”

“You know you can’t control someone’s emotions, right?” said Marco, shaking his head at me.

“It’s called psychological tactics—something you know nothing about given the way you rush into everything like a mad man.”

“That’s called the element of surprise,” said Marco, glaring at me. “It’s better to hit your enemy before they know what’s happening.”

“I know how to play this. I’ll have her eating out of my hand and telling me everything we need to know.”

“You know you don’t just tell a girl ‘trust me’ and she’ll spill all her secrets?” I knew I wasn’t persuading Marco over to my way of thinking.

I sighed. “I know. But I also know she’ll be of no use to us unless we do things my way. Most girls won’t respond well to your violent tactics. Look what happened with Juliana.”

“Juliana was just fine with my caveman tactics. She married me, didn’t she?”

“Believe me, this girl will be of no use to us unless we do things my way. She can stay in my bedroom, and I’ll sleep on the couch in there—that way I can keep an eye on her concussion and at the same time make sure she doesn’t try to escape.”

“You’ve spent five minutes with her, and you already think you know her?” He looked hard at me. “Look, fine, but I need answers by tomorrow. Or we’re doing it my way and I won’t care that she’s a woman.”

I nodded. “I hear Ovidio is being taken to the clinic,” I said, changing the subject.

“The doctor says he needs emergency surgery if he’s to stay alive longer than the next couple of hours. The soldiers are taking him there right now.”

The clinic was a private facility that asked no questions in exchange for copious amounts of money. In a normal hospital, the sorts of injuries we encountered in our line of work would attract the attention of the FBI all too quickly, and that was a risk we couldn’t take.

Marco continued, “That fucker better not die on us. We just need to keep him alive long enough to find out what’s been going on.”

I went back into my bedroom.

The sedative was wearing off now, and the girl was getting out of my bed.

I strode toward her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I want to go home...” Her words were strained, and she stumbled in her haste to get away from me.

I caught her in my arms before she hit the floor and pushed her back onto the bed.

I felt my temper flare.

There was no way she was going home before I got what I needed out of her.

And she could give me that either willingly or unwillingly.

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CHAPTER 5

ALESSIO

“You can’t go home yet. The doctor says you have a pretty bad concussion. Someone needs to keep an eye on you for the next twenty-four hours, so you will be staying here until then.”

“I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want anything to do with the Fratellanza.” She didn’t even try to hide the bitterness or hatred in her voice.

“You’re in no state to argue. You’re staying for the next twenty-four hours, so you better get used to it.”

She frowned at me, but despite that, I could see she looked exhausted and scared.

Damnit, I couldn’t have her scared of me if my plan was going to work. Irrespective of her involvement in her father’s dealings, I had to remember

that she was only twenty-one, and she had just been kidnapped by the Bratva.

I deliberately made my voice gentler. “You’re safe here. We’ve found out some more about what happened, and I believe you that you don’t know anything about it. You’ve already passed out once, and concussions can have serious complications, so we just need to check that everything’s okay over the next day or so. The doctor says you need to rest.” When she didn’t object any further, I carried on, “Do you want to take a shower—it might make you feel more comfortable?”

She hesitated, but then she nodded. “O-okay.”

I opened a drawer in my dresser and grabbed one of my t-shirts for her to put on after her shower. Her nightgown was ripped and only fit for the trash can.

I handed the t-shirt to her. “Don’t lock the door. I’ll be nearby. Call out and let me know if you need help. You have a nasty cut on your back, probably from when you fell down the stairs—the doctor cleaned it and put a dressing over it.”

She nodded at me before carefully removing my leather jacket from her body while at the same time clutching the torn corners of her nightgown to cover up her breasts. “Um, thanks for the loan of the jacket.”

“You’re welcome.”

She slowly made her way into my attached bathroom and closed the door behind her, not locking the door as I had instructed. Good, at least she knew how to follow an order.

I waited outside the bathroom door and after a minute, I heard the water start running in the shower.

After about fifteen minutes, when she still hadn't finished, I called out to her through the bathroom door. "Is everything alright in there?"

But there was no response.

I rapped my knuckles on the door and called out. "Do you need any help?"

I gave her a few more seconds to reply, a hint of unease creeping into my body although there was no way she could escape through the bathroom window.

When she didn't answer, I raised my voice. "I'm opening the door and coming in."

I opened the bathroom door a crack and saw that the bathroom was full of steam, but my eyes were immediately drawn down to the small body sitting on the floor of the shower. Her back was against the tiled wall, and her knees were pulled up to her chest with her head resting on top of her arms, hiding her breasts from my view while the water fell over her.

Shit. I rushed forward. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes were closed, but upon hearing my voice, they jerked open. She just looked at me, and I could see the confusion in her expression.

"You must have fallen asleep. It's the concussion causing you to feel drowsy."

"I'm sorry. I was feeling a bit dizzy, so I thought I would sit down for a moment, just until it passed."

"Did you get a chance to wash?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think I've got the energy. I just want to go to sleep," she said as she tried to get to her feet.

She pressed her hands up to the tiled wall of the shower to steady herself as she got up but, despite that, her dizziness made her unsteady and she

cried out as her foot slipped on the wet floor of the shower.

I reached for her, clasping my hands around her curved hips and righting her body. I kept my hands on her as I asked, “Are you okay now?”

She just looked at me, and I could see that she was disoriented. Her body felt slack in my hold—like she had no strength left.

Without thinking, I made sure she was safe on her feet before letting her go and stripping off my black pants and dark top.

When I was naked, I stepped into the shower behind her.

If she had been in any other state, she might have argued with me. However, as weak as she was now, she put up no resistance.

I deliberately didn’t look at her body. I was here to help her, nothing else. I stood behind her and put my hands around her arms and ushered her forward under the spray of water. She put her pale face up to the hot water as I grabbed my bottle of shampoo and poured a small amount onto the palm of my hand.

I placed my fingertips against her scalp, making her flinch at the sudden contact.

“Easy, I’m just going to wash your hair.”

She gave a small nod, and I started to move my fingers and massage the shampoo through her auburn strands.

As I moved my fingers in a gentle rhythm, she unconsciously pushed her head forward into my hands.

Her eyes were closed as I ran my fingers through her hair, and I saw her lips gently part and a soft moan escape.

I felt my cock stir and found myself wondering what it would be like to hear her moaning while I was inside her tight pussy.

Fuck, I couldn’t let these thoughts distract me. I had a job to do—I had to find out what she knew about her father’s dealings with the Bratva and her exact involvement in it all.

“That should do,” I said abruptly, maneuvering her back under the spray to rinse her strands.

Once her hair was clean, I picked up my body wash and used it to soap her whole body.

Even though she had her back to me and I consciously kept my eyes off her, I couldn’t stop my fingers from feeling her sumptuous curves and inviting crevices, the sensations under my fingertips conjuring up erotic images in my mind.

I ran my soapy hands over her smooth belly and slowly up over her full breasts.

I sensed the heaviness of her tits as I cupped them in my large, calloused palms, and I felt her nipples tighten into large, hard peaks in response to the caress of my rough fingers.

The earlier image from the warehouse of her rounded breasts and taut pink nipples reappeared in my mind.

I slipped my hands down her body, stroking my soaped fingers over her curved ass.

Then I moved my hands to the front of her body again and inched toward the illicit place at the apex of her thighs.

My hands slipped between her shapely legs, and I tried not to let them linger, not to let her body entice me.

Each caress tormented me and made my balls ache with need.

Although I tried to keep my eyes off her, the feel of her perfection under my fingertips and the images invoked in my mind were too much of a

temptation, and I couldn’t help my hooded gaze from stealing a look at her nakedness.

Fuck me. Her breasts were gloriously full, and her succulent, hard nipples tilted upwards, practically offering themselves to me and begging to be sucked on.

I licked my lips as I thought about fastening my lips around those luscious buds, as I saw them glisten with beads of moisture.

Her body was the perfect female form, soft and curved in all the right places.

Her cheeks were flushed with the heat of the shower, and I wondered what she would look like in the throes of orgasm.

What would she sound like as her pussy came on my cock? Would she sigh or scream? Would her pussy quiver around my erection or would it tightly clench my dick?

Being naked together in such an intimate setting and the sight of her wet, slippery body so close to mine under the cascading water was agony to my dick.

I found myself wanting to bend her over, penetrate her tightness, and fuck her senseless until she was screaming my name.

And she was my prisoner now, and I could do whatever I wanted to her.

I forced myself to flick my gaze away, and through self-restraint, I managed to keep my cock under control although it was killing me.

“All clean,” I said through gritted teeth. “Let’s get you out and dried off.”

If she hadn’t still needed my help, I would have stayed in the shower and jerked off. Instead, I turned off the water and reluctantly got out of the shower.

I grabbed a towel and quickly dried myself off before taking another towel and holding out my hand to her. She slowly lifted her small hand and placed it in mine.

I helped her step out of the shower, trying to ignore the droplets of water clinging to the tips of her nipples and every other inch of her body. I lifted the towel toward her and rubbed the soft towel over her skin until she was dry. “That should do.”

I looked around for the t-shirt I had given her and saw it on top of the vanity counter. “Arms up,” I instructed, and I slipped the t-shirt over her body, hiding her breasts again, although the slight dampness on her skin made the fabric cling alluringly to her shape.

As I led her back to my bed, I realized that she still needed to brush her wet hair out. “Here, sit down for a second,” I said, guiding her down into a sitting position on the side of my bed.

I grabbed my hairbrush from the dresser and stood beside her, running the brush through her hair, the auburn color looking more intense due to its wetness. I was gentle when I reached each knot, taking my time to get the tangles out without hurting her.

“Thank you,” she said, as I laid the hairbrush down on the nightstand next to the bed.

“You’re welcome. Let’s get you into bed.” I pulled down the covers and she slowly climbed in. Being so close to her, I could sense her unique scent —it was sweet with an undertone of berries.

I looked at her in my bed and could see that the shower had taken all her remaining energy, so I left her in my room while I headed downstairs for dinner.

***

Juliana, Marco’s wife, was making dinner.

Great, that meant that we would have to order takeout later on.

My younger siblings were in the large living room, which was open to the kitchen and the dining room.

There were five of us siblings in total and we all shared the same dark Marchiano features. Marco was the oldest at twenty-seven. I was just a year younger than him at twenty-six. Next was our brother, Camillo—he was eighteen and already initiated into the Fratellanza.

Our youngest siblings were Danio, who was fifteen, and Debi, who at fourteen was the baby of the family.

“Who’s that girl you took upstairs?” asked Danio.

I exchanged a look with Camillo. I knew that he would have kept quiet about what was going on. “She’s the daughter of one of our Captains. The Bratva took her and we managed to get her back, but I needed the doctor to see her.”

Debi looked on with concern in her deep brown eyes. “Is she going to be okay?” she asked earnestly.

“Don’t worry, shortcake. The doctor said she has a concussion, so we just need to keep an eye on her for the next day or so.”

We sat down to dinner around the kitchen island. Juliana had made a pasta dish and I dug in, although I wasn’t really that hungry.

Juliana was shooting dark looks at me. I wasn’t sure what Marco had told her, but I knew she was probably unhappy that I had the girl up in my

bedroom. I tried to ignore her and instead concentrated on my food. This was Fratellanza business and had nothing to do with her.

Marco sat next to me. He was already tense due to the events of the last couple of days, and his mood was not helped by Camillo making faces as he ate.

Camillo peered at his pasta. “Why are there so many black bits in this? How the fuck does anyone burn pasta?” he exclaimed, screwing up his face as he tasted the meal.

Juliana just shrugged, “It seems fine to me.” She always seemed oblivious to how bad her cooking was and would eat anything without complaining. And I knew Marco was eating the pasta to humor her, especially now that she was pregnant and had been having issues with high blood pressure.

Marco and Juliana had only been married a short while. Their marriage had been rocky at the start, having got off to a violent beginning, plus she had only been nineteen and he was eight years older than her. However, once they had gotten over their difficulties and settled into married life, Juliana decided to take a cooking course because she said she wanted to do more around the home—although in all honesty, I hadn’t seen any improvement in her cooking skills since then. Marco really needed to ask the guy who ran the course for a refund.

I could see Camillo sneakily feeding the burned bits to Juliana’s dog, Mr. Fluffy, when he thought no one was watching. When Marco had married Juliana she had brought her dog with her, much to my dismay, and now he was a firmly entrenched member of our household.

“Don’t worry, Camillo. I’ve baked an apple pie for dessert. I’ll give you an extra big slice,” chirped Debi.

Camillo’s face broke into a wide grin. “You’re the best little sister ever, Debi.” The smile made Camillo look less like the thug he normally looked like. He was huge and the most muscled out of all of us as a result of his obsession with weights and working out. He also had the most tattoos, including tattoos running up the back of his neck and down both his arms. However, despite his outward looks, Camillo was more soft-hearted than he appeared.

“Alessio, can I take some apple pie up to your friend?” asked Debi.

Marco and I exchanged a look. “Best not to. The doctor said she needs complete rest, so we don’t want to disturb her right now.”

“Okay.” Debi was so innocent, and I felt guilty not telling her the complete truth—that the girl was here so that we could get answers out of her. But she was my baby sister and I would protect her from our cruel world for as long as possible. Debi was a soothing balm to our scarred, violent hearts, and I didn’t want anything changing that.

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CHAPTER 6

ALESSIO

After dinner, I went back upstairs with a tray of food for Caterina. I went into my bedroom and found that she was still awake, although she looked sleepy.

She sat up, and as she did, she shrunk back against the bed.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” I said softly. I needed to get her to trust me so she would tell me everything she knew about what she and her father had been up to.

I sat down on the side of the bed with the tray of food on my lap. “I’ve brought you some soup for dinner.”

She went to reach for the tray.

“No, I’ll do it,” I said quietly, yet firmly.

She sat back and watched me diffidently as I raised a spoonful of soup to her mouth. She brought her head slightly forward and slowly opened her full lips, wrapping them around the spoon as she took the soup into her mouth.

I kept my eyes fixed on her as I fed her. I liked taking care of her for some strange reason, and the thought of this and the sight of her plump lips made my dick harden to steel. Fortunately, the tray on my lap hid this from her.

She watched me warily, not saying anything to me. When I was about halfway through the bowl of soup, she held up her hand. “I’m full, thank you.”

“You’ve only eaten half the soup. You need to build your strength back up, Caterina.”

“No one calls me Caterina except for my father. Everyone calls me Cate.” This was the most she had said to me since I had brought her here.

“Caterina is a pretty name. You don’t like it?”

“It was my mom’s name. I was named after her. But everyone always called me Cate because it was too confusing having two Caterinas. After my mom died, my father started calling me Caterina. He said it helped him remember her.” She sounded wistful thinking about the past.

“How long ago did she die?”

“It happened seven years ago. I was fourteen years old.”

I recalled that her mom had been shot in a home burglary. Christ, in our world there were so many deadly dangers that you didn’t expect anyone to be killed by a burglar.

My t-shirt, which she was wearing, dwarfed her petite and slender body. I liked seeing her in my clothes.

I could see the outline of her breasts under the fabric, and the visible points of her nipples made it obvious that she wasn't wearing a bra. The thought of her in my t-shirt with no bra pleased me.

Her hazel eyes were huge in her face, green pools flecked with swirls of amber. For some reason, I found myself wanting to reach out and run my fingers through her auburn hair again.

"You should get some rest now."

I took the tray downstairs and then went to the office to do some work.

I doubted Cate would be awake for long, as she had already been looking drowsy again by the time she'd finished the soup.

CATE

Later on, I heard a noise and opened my eyes. Alessio was settling down on the couch in the corner of the room with a pillow and spare blanket. He had stripped off his top and pants, leaving just his boxer briefs on.

He'd changed after he'd brought me into the main house. He'd said he now believed that I knew nothing about what had happened with the Russians. He'd believed my lie.

Still, I needed to get away from here and away from him. But right now, I felt too weak to fight his insistence that I stay until I was recovered.

He unstrapped his knife holster from his thigh and placed his revolver on the small table next to him.

Tattoos decorated his chest, including a small tattoo at the top of his left shoulder depicting a knife piercing a hand. The latter was the tattoo that all

members of the Fratellanza received upon their initiation—I recognized it because my father had the same tattoo.

The Fratellanza's business interests were mainly in the drug trade, laundering the dirty money through their legitimate businesses of hotels and clubs, and the net result was that they had become extremely wealthy. There was, however, danger always present.

But I didn't have the energy to think about any of that right now. Instead, I snuggled back down under the covers. I could smell the scent of him on his t-shirt that I was wearing—it was a mix of soap and something like sandalwood.

As I drifted off to sleep, I inhaled the comforting smell and thought that, despite his deadly appearance, Alessio being nearby made me feel safer somehow.

***

During the night, I had that nightmare again. The one about my mom and brother…

"Mom, can I have some more juice please?" I asked.

"Sure, honey. There's another bottle in the pantry."

I had been in the pantry getting some more juice when I heard a commotion coming from the kitchen.

My mom started screaming. And some men were shouting at her. My mom was saying that she didn't know where my father was.

I heard my brother trying to talk reason to the intruders. He'd already been initiated into the Fratellanza and was seventeen by then. He was my only sibling, and I idolized him.

I'm not sure what they were arguing about. I was frozen to the spot in the pantry. My brain told me that it was safer to stay put.

The men didn't seem to know I was there or if they did know, they didn't care—maybe because I was just a young girl.

I decided to let them leave before I came out. I waited. But the arguing carried on. My mom was pleading with the men to go. But they said they needed to see my father.

Then I heard my father come in. I remember thinking, thank God, he'll be able to sort this out with the men and then they will leave us alone.

I heard more arguing. For some reason, it didn't sound good. Normally my father could deal with anything—he was a Captain in the Fratellanza—and his job meant that he always knew how to deal with people and get them to do what he wanted.

My mom was screaming. I wondered if I should run out to be with my father so that he could keep me safe. But my mind told me to stay put and stay hidden for now.

Then I heard bangs—gunshots. My eyes were fixed on the pantry door as if by staring hard enough at it, I would be able to see what had happened.

It was all silent. Then I heard my father speaking quickly and telling someone to do something.

My father carried on talking, but there was no one talking back to him. He was talking to himself, or maybe he was talking on the phone. I heard his words—they were panicky. He was giving out orders and talking about the doctor.

I opened the pantry door just a crack. But the creaking hinges made him whirl around on his heel. When I saw him, I opened the door a bit more.

"Cate, thank God you're all right! I didn't know where you were."

"Father?"

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay."

"Are you calling the police?"

"No, I've called the doctor."

"We need an ambulance. We need to take them to the hospital." But looking at my mom and brother, I was terrified that even the hospital couldn't help them now. My mom's eyes were half open and her body was deadly still. My brother's eyes were closed and there was blood everywhere. Deep red blood everywhere. "Please call the ambulance, Father."

"It is better that the doctor comes. He knows your mom and your brother."

"Father, I'm scared," I sobbed into his chest.

"No one is ever going to hurt you, Cate."

That was the last day he called me Cate. After that, he always called me Caterina because he said that was the best way to remember Mom.

"Wake up, Cate." Those words didn't feel right. They weren't what happened in the dream.

I ignored the words, trying to go back into my dream, trying to help my mom and brother. I just had to persuade my father to call an ambulance. The hospital would be able to make them better so that they could stay with me instead of leaving me all alone.

"Cate, wake up." I heard that unfamiliar voice again.

I jerked my eyes open.

Taking in the darkness surrounding me, I could feel a firm hold on my arm. And everything about the room felt strange.

Then I remembered where I was. I was in the home of Alessio Marchiano. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I saw Alessio's face, dark hair and his rich brown eyes with their thick lashes watching me. "You were having a nightmare."

I took deep gulps of air, attempting to slow down my breathing. Trying to bring my mind back to the present and trying to leave the terrible memories behind.

But I knew that I would never be able to leave them behind.

In the daytime, these memories hid behind my thoughts. And at nighttime, those memories tumbled into my nightmares.

I felt tears rolling down my cheeks, the tears feeling warm against my shivery skin. My gulps turned into heaving sobs. I didn't know which was worse—reliving the memories again and again in my dreams, or living every waking hour without my mom and brother.

"Hey, it's okay, it was just a nightmare."

If only it had just been a nightmare. It had really happened, and it wouldn't stop haunting me.

"Shush, Cate, I'm here. It's going to be okay. No one can hurt you now."

But that wasn't right. Because what happened all those years ago could still hurt me every day. And it still did hurt me every day, every time I thought about what they had done and what they had taken away from me.

Alessio was sitting on the edge of the bed. As the sobs kept on coming, he reached over and wrapped me in his warm embrace.

His strong arms felt safe, as if he could protect me from those men and from my memories—if only he could. I wanted his arms around me. I wanted him to protect me.

I was trembling—it felt so real like it had all happened just a minute ago. And I felt exhausted as if all my muscles had been wrung out and my whole mind had been taken over by these awful memories.

Alessio caressed the back of my head with his hand, trying to calm me with each stroke. He whispered to me, “You’re safe now, and nothing can happen to you here in my home. I’ll look after you.”

I tried to calm down, willing my pulse to stop racing.

“What were you dreaming about?” he asked.

I clung to the warmth of his body, hoping it would ease my shivering and bring me back into the present. “It was just a nightmare,” I sobbed.

“A nightmare doesn’t leave you like this. What happened to you to make you like this?”

But I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t stop the heaving tears.

He laid me down in his bed. He smoothed my hair back from my forehead before laying down next to me, pulling me into his arms and resting my head against his chest.

And he just let me cry, he just let me grieve all over again like I had already done so many times in the past. And as he held me, he made soothing noises and whispered into my hair.

Once my sobs had quieted down, he spoke gently to me.

“Was your nightmare about the Russians?” I stayed quiet. “If you talk about it, it might help.” Nothing could help bring my mom or brother back. “You can talk to me, cara. Please let me help you.”

And those words started to make me unravel and made me lower my guard, the barrier I always kept up between myself and the rest of the world. How I longed for someone to help me. And him calling me ‘cara’, an Italian endearment, made me feel closer to him somehow.

Those words might have been my undoing. But then I reminded myself who he was.

He was the Consigliere of the Fratellanza. And, like all Made Men, underneath the surface lay a monster who needed blood and death to survive. A monster who was trying to drag me into his lair so that he could make me vulnerable again and destroy me all over again.

“I can’t remember what I was dreaming about.” He stilled when I said that—I could tell that he didn’t believe me.

But it didn’t matter, anyway. Talking about my nightmares wouldn’t stop them from being real. He might be the Consigliere of the Fratellanza, but even he couldn’t change the past.

He didn’t say anything else, nor did he release me from his embrace.

Normally, I found it hard to fall asleep after I had that nightmare. But today was different. Alessio’s presence meant I didn’t have to be scared of the dark. I didn’t have to be scared of the memories creeping up on me.

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CHAPTER 7

CATE

When I woke in the morning, I immediately sensed the unfamiliar sheets around me. As my eyes opened, I tried to drag myself out of the sleepiness that was fogging my mind.

I remembered the nightmare last night and Alessio holding me, trying to comfort me. I remembered being in his arms as we laid together on his bed. I must have fallen asleep like that.

Had he stayed next to me all night? He was gone now, so I couldn't be sure.

I saw that he had left some clothes at the end of the bed, and I got up to take a look. There was a pair of jeans and a pink top. I recalled that he had a younger sister, so these must have belonged to her. At least I could change out of his t-shirt now and put on some proper clothes.

I got dressed in the bathroom before coming back out into the bedroom. Alessio still wasn't back, and I decided to go find him so that I could leave here and go back to my apartment.

I wasn't sure what time it was, but the house was quiet. I crept down the stairs, for some reason not wanting to disturb this house which was a stranger to me.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I could see double doors leading into what looked like a living room.

I took a couple of steps forward. Beyond some couches was the kitchen where Alessio appeared to be making breakfast. He was dressed in dark jeans, a fitted charcoal top and black boots. He was wearing a gun holster across his chest and there was a knife sheath strapped to his left thigh. He looked ready for battle and there was a lethal aura around him that made me shudder.

As I walked quietly over to him, it was as if he sensed me approaching and he looked around, fixing his dark brown eyes on me.

"How are you this morning?" he said.

"I'm fine."

"You didn't seem to have any more bad dreams last night."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that."

"There's no need to be sorry. Do you want some breakfast?"

I desperately wanted to go home, but I didn't want to appear too eager. I really needed to get away from here, and I was also worried about letting down the school where I worked. "Okay, sure," I said, walking over to the kitchen island and sitting down at the counter. I poured myself a glass of orange juice and sipped a mouthful, allowing the zesty citrus to refresh me.

I watched while Alessio cooked French toast. He whisked up some eggs with seasonings before soaking pieces of sourdough bread in it.

“How’s your head this morning?”

“I’ve still got a bit of a headache, but I’ll be fine to go home after breakfast.”

“Not until Dr. Cotrone has checked you over again.” It was clear from his tone that this was non-negotiable. I knew that protesting would get me nowhere, so I resolved to wait to see the doctor and then I’d return home later today.

I watched while he cooked the bread in a skillet until it was golden brown. When it was ready, he dished it up and pushed a plate toward me, together with some maple syrup. “Here, dig in. Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” He poured me a cup. “Do you always cook breakfast?”

“I usually take turns with some of the others, depending on what everyone’s got going on. The others have already had their breakfast this morning. Danio and Debi left for school a while ago, and Juliana has taken her dog for a walk. The others had work to do, so it’s just the two of us this morning. I thought you might be hungry since you only had soup for dinner last night and you didn’t finish it all.”

I bit into a piece of the French toast and found it to be delicious. “It’s odd having a Made Man cook for me. My father can’t even toast a slice of bread. My mom used to do all the cooking. After my mom and brother died, my grandmother moved in to help look after my father and me and she does all the cooking now. She won’t so much as let my father clear up his own dishes.” I didn’t know why I was telling him about my family. It wasn’t something I normally shared with people.

We ate the rest of our breakfast mostly in silence.

After we finished eating, I started to gather up my dishes.

“No, leave that. You looked exhausted.”

“Charming. Is that how you speak to all the girls?”

A smile escaped his lips in response.

But it was true—just getting up and going downstairs for breakfast had exhausted me and my head had started pounding again and I felt lightheaded.

“Go back up to bed. You need to rest.”

I nodded and didn’t argue. I headed back up the stairs and gratefully climbed into Alessio’s bed. Closing my eyes, I willed my head to stop thumping and eventually I must have fallen asleep.

***

Later, I woke up to find Alessio sitting on the edge of the bed. “I just came up to see how you were doing.”

“I’m sorry, I must have fallen asleep.”

“Don’t be sorry. Your concussion is to blame. Here, let me take a look at your head.”

He shifted closer to me, and I propped myself up on my forearms, looking up at him as his fingers ran through my hair. I watched the concentration on his face as he checked me over. He gently felt my scalp, and I winced as he touched a tender spot on my head.

“Sorry, it’s a pretty nasty bump you’ve got there.”

He ran his fingers around the rest of my scalp. His fingers felt strong and somehow reassured me.

Everything about him was strong. I looked up at his arms and I could see his muscles flexing. I inhaled his scent—a mix of soap and sandalwood. As his fingers massaged my scalp, I sighed and gave into the relaxation radiating from his fingers.

He looked down at my face and paused for a few moments, staring intently at me, before he brushed his lips against mine—softly and without any demands or expectations.

ALESSIO

I pressed my mouth up against her lips, feeling their fullness. And her sweet scent, with its slight hint of berries, enveloped me.

She had stilled, taken aback by what was happening.

I brought my hands up to her narrow shoulders, gently holding her in place so she wouldn’t run from me.

As I lightly brushed my lips against hers again, I heard a small sound escape her lips.

I felt one of her hands reach up and tentatively touch my chest. She parted her lips, and I accepted her invitation, using my tongue to explore her mouth.

She met my tongue with hers, although hesitantly, as if not quite sure what to do.

It reminded me that Cate, as a Mafia daughter, probably hadn’t been kissed before. And that thought pleased me immensely.

Suddenly, I pulled away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” My tone was abrupt.

She looked confused, but I couldn’t worry about that right now. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. I had a job to do, and I needed to get on with it.

“Come on, let’s go for a walk outside. The fresh air will do you good.”

“Okay, um…I’ll just wash my hands and face first.” A blush had spread over her cheeks, and I watched her quickly walk into my bathroom before hearing her turn on the tap.

I don’t know what had made me kiss her.

Something about her had called to my inner desires.

I wasn’t usually impulsive. Normally, I thought through everything I did, weighing up the pros and cons before deciding the best course of action. Today, however, something had made me want to taste her before she could slip from my grasp.

Shaking my head, I dragged my mind back to what I needed to achieve. She’d said a couple of times that she wanted to go home. But if she tried, she would soon find out that she was my prisoner here and that there was no way she was leaving until I got what I needed out of her.

After a couple of minutes, she emerged and didn’t say anything as she followed me downstairs.

“Here, you might want to put on a sweater.” I handed her one of my sweaters, which she pulled on over her top. It was far too big on her petite frame, making her look even more vulnerable. I pushed that thought from my mind—I needed to focus on the task at hand.

We went outside. Our mansion had extensive grounds, plus its own woods and orchard. We walked toward the woods, eventually reaching

Danio and Debi's old treehouse, with its weather-beaten flag blowing in the breeze. The flag had a logo saying 'Debi and Danio' around a teddy bear face.

"That flag is cute," Cate smiled as she looked up at the treehouse.

"Yeah, it is. Marco and I built the treehouse when we all first moved into this house."

"Your siblings wanted a treehouse?"

"It was my idea—to try and cheer them up. They were grieving the death of our parents and I wanted to do something fun for them."

She looked at me as if she were trying to figure me out.

As we strolled past the treehouse, I pulled her small hand into mine.

I don't know what made me do that, but I needed to touch her. I needed her close to me.

I know I had regretted our earlier closeness in the bedroom when I had kissed her, but I couldn't keep away from her. And even though I knew it was confusing her even more, I wrapped my fingers tightly around hers.

After walking for a while, my mind went back to yesterday. "What did the Bratva want with you and your father?"

She stayed silent.

"Cate?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

I felt my blood pressure rise, along with anger at this girl who was next to me.

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CHAPTER 8

ALESSIO

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I could see that my question had caught her off-guard. I tried to dampen my fury. “It might help to talk to me about—”

“I don’t really remember much about what happened.” She cut me off. She was clearly trying to close down this conversation.

“You don’t remember?” I cocked my head to one side as I looked at her.

“No…my memory is kind of hazy. These headaches make it difficult to think.”

I saw her shiver, despite the fact that she was wearing my sweater. The air had turned cooler. “Are you cold?”

She shrugged. “A bit.”

“Come on, let’s get back inside and I’ll make us some lunch.”

I made us both a sandwich, and we ate a late lunch in the kitchen.

She didn’t say anything while we ate.

I watched her closely and could tell she was uncomfortable after my earlier questions. She was definitely hiding something from me.

Afterward, she went back up to my bedroom to rest.

CATE

After lunch, I went back up to the bedroom, saying I needed a rest. I needed to get away from Alessio—away from his questions and away from whatever else was going on between us.

I felt some sort of pull toward Alessio.

I couldn’t understand it. Did he like me? Is that why he kissed me? His actions lent an intimacy to the situation, an intangible dimension that made me wonder what he felt toward me.

These thoughts made me uncomfortable, but even more, they made me confused.

To distract myself, I looked around Alessio’s bedroom. Although the mansion was a modern home, Alessio’s bedroom had a cozy feel to it, and that surprised me.

The large bed, nightstands, and dresser all matched and were made of a wood with warm tones. The whole room was ruthlessly tidy, almost like a hotel room—so either the maid was excellent, or Alessio was a neat freak.

In the corner of the room was a small couch and an old-fashioned rocking chair, behind which the whole wall was one large bookshelf full of books that were all neatly ordered. The shelves held every sort of book

imaginable, from novels to biographies, history books, and even children's books. I ran my fingers down the spine of a well-worn copy of 'Anne of Green Gables'. I loved that book when I was a little girl.

Alessio didn't strike me as the bookish kind. I would have expected him to have had a display cabinet to show off all his guns and knives. He was five years older than me, and being a Made Man and Consigliere was his whole life. However, the books and warm wood of the furniture lent a certain softness to his bedroom, which was further enhanced by the pretty view of the gardens from the window.

The grounds looked enormous and there were lots of trees stretching into a wooded area, plus a helipad to one side, complete with a chopper. There was an outdoor swimming pool, plus I could see a striking glasshouse containing an indoor pool. I shuddered as my eyes fell upon the large garage block—thank God I wouldn't ever have to go there again.

I spent the rest of the afternoon curled up on the couch, reading the copy of Anne of Green Gables I had picked from the shelf.

Later, Alessio came in and I looked up from the page I was reading.

He moved like a jaguar with prowling, precise movements, and he looked primed to launch into battle at a moment's notice. He was still wearing his knife sheath and gun holster, reminding me that he was highly trained—he knew how to use a weapon and he wasn't afraid to use it to lethal effect. He always looked in complete control of any situation—I doubted he ever lost control, not even of his emotions.

"Um, I hope you don't mind me borrowing one of your books?"

He cocked his head to one side and regarded me. "Of course not. How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess. Definitely less exhausted."

“What are you reading?” He looked at the book in my lap.

I picked up the book and held it up for him to see the cover.

“Ah, the trials and tribulations of Anne with an E.”

“You’ve read it?”

“Several times,” he replied dryly.

I couldn’t help gaping at him. “Really?” I found that hard to believe.

“Really. It’s Debi’s favorite book, and I used to read it to her at bedtime. She’s old enough to read by herself now and has her own set of the Anne books in her bedroom—I got them for her on her 10th birthday. But when she was little, she liked to curl up on my lap in the rocking chair while I read to her. I don’t know how many times we read that book.” It did look worn in a well-loved kind of way.

He smiled as he remembered something. “She always used to ask why we had to live in such a modern home. I reckon she would be happiest in an old rambling house somewhere, a place with lots of charm and character.”

“Have you always lived here?”

“No, we moved to this house when our parents died. Before that, Marco and I shared an apartment for a bit. But when our parents passed away, we bought this place and moved our siblings in with us. Camillo was nine but was already acting like a grumpy teenager by then. However, Danio was only six and Debi was five years old, so Danio and Debi were still into bedtime stories.”

“So that’s why you have so many children’s books on your bookshelf?”

“Yes. Marco was never really into books, but I always loved them, so I didn’t mind being on story-time duty.”

ALESSIO

Late afternoon, Dr. Cotrone visited again to check on Cate.

“How’s the patient today?” he asked me before heading up to see her.

“Non-communicative.”

“Ah, I see. What I mean is how’s her head?”

“Tell me, Doctor, how likely is the concussion to have caused some memory loss?”

“What sort of memory loss are we talking about—significant periods of her past or more recent events?”

“It seems to be around the events of the last few days, since the Bratva kidnapped her and her father.”

“The physical trauma of a blow to the head and concussion can cause headaches, irritability, and problems with memory. However, sometimes it’s the emotional trauma that causes the memory issues—the brain is blocking out the memories to protect the individual’s mental wellbeing.”

“But isn’t it better that they talk about what happened, so they can come to terms with it and get over it?”

Dr. Cotrone regarded me silently. “Are you asking because you need to get information out of her or because you are concerned about her mental well-being?”

I ran my hand through my hair. “I don’t know.” I didn’t know, but if I had to guess, I was afraid the answer would be both.

“Whether or not the concussion has affected her memory, I can say for certain that what has happened will have deeply affected her on an

emotional level and may possibly lead to some long-term issues, such as anxiety or depression."

I was used to killing people—that was my job. Other Mafia families were always trying to muscle in on our territory, and in our world, it was kill or be killed. But normally I didn't have to face the aftermath—the families left behind.

I told myself they knew the rules of our world. That they enjoyed the monetary rewards that came with being in the Mafia life, and that they knew the risks that came side by side with that wealth.

"I'll just go up and check on her."

"You know the way. Thanks, Dr. Cotrone."

I waited downstairs until the doctor returned.

"I've advised her that as the headaches are continuing, she should stay here until they subside."

"Don't worry, Doctor, she's not going anywhere just yet."

I climbed the staircase and went back into the bedroom. "The doctor says you need to stay until your concussion has resolved."

"I feel absolutely fine, and there's really no need—"

"No arguments," I said with steel in my voice. "You should lie down and get some rest now."

With a sigh, she climbed into bed and let me tuck the comforter around her.

She might not have wanted to stay. But I wasn't letting go of her that easily.

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CHAPTER 9

ALESSIO

That evening, I took dinner up on a tray to Cate. “I thought you might want dinner up here, seeing as you said you’re tired.”

“You didn’t have to bring my dinner up. I don’t mind coming down.”

“It’s no trouble.” I felt a slight pang of guilt at my lie. I had brought her meal up because I didn’t want her mixing with the family, and they were all home for dinner. Danio and Debi might ask questions, and I didn’t want them involved in this.

“Roasted chicken and mashed potatoes? One of my favorites. Did you make this?”

“Yes, I thought you might appreciate some comfort food. And it will help build up your strength.” It was strange that I felt the need to comfort her.

I sat with her while she ate, enjoying just watching her and chatting. I saw some papers and a pencil next to her on the nightstand. “Did you do these?” I asked, looking at the drawings of the view from my bedroom window.

“I hope you don’t mind me using some of your paper?”

“Of course not. You’re pretty good at this.”

She blushed at my compliment. “Thanks. I’ve always liked art.”

After dinner, Cate said, “I’m just going to take a shower if that’s okay with you?”

“Sure, but you look a bit unsteady on your feet—that will be the concussion. It would be better if I run a bath for you.”

“Okay, thank you,” she murmured.

I went into my attached bathroom and started to run the hot water into the tub. When the bath was full, I turned off the taps and headed back into my bedroom.

“Wait here,” I told her, and I went out of my bedroom and down the hall until I reached Debi’s bedroom.

I knocked and heard her call out in her sing-song voice. “Come in!”

She was sitting on her bed doing her homework. She was fourteen years old, and her bedroom was full of pink and posters of boy bands. She had the same dark hair that was shared by all my siblings, and her eyes were the color of rich chocolate.

“Hey Debi, do you have any of that stuff that you put in the bathtub?”

She frowned slightly. “What, like cleaning spray?”

I chuckled. “No, I’ve got plenty of that—you know I’m good at cleaning.”

“Yeah, you are,” she said, as she smiled her beautiful smile back at me. Man, she was going to be a heartbreaker when she grew up. But she better not grow up anytime soon, I thought with a stab of anxiety. “What exactly do you need?” she asked.

“That stuff that makes bubbles and makes the water smell nice.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. Hang on a second.” She went into her bathroom and came back a minute later, holding two bottles up at me.

“You need bubble bath or bath oils—which do you want?”

I was silent. This was harder than a math quiz. “Which is better?”

“You can use both. Here, take them, I have plenty.” She handed both bottles over.

“Thanks, shortcake. You’re the best.” I stopped to press a kiss to the top of her head.

I went back to my bedroom where I found Cate still sitting on the bed where I’d left her. I went into the bathroom and added the bubble bath and oils to the water. Returning to my bedroom, I opened my dresser and grabbed another one of my t-shirts for her to put on after her bath. I liked seeing her in my t-shirts, I thought to myself.

Handing her the t-shirt, I said, “I’ll wait here in case you need any help.”

She avoided my gaze and blushed, probably remembering what had happened in the shower yesterday.

I waited outside the bathroom and heard the water as she got into the tub. I was worried about her drowsiness, but at least sitting in the tub she couldn’t come to much harm.

A while later, I heard the water gurgling down the drain and thought she must be drying herself. I told myself not to think about it because imagining

her naked was wreaking havoc with my cock. I was a red-blooded male, after all, and she did have a good body.

After another couple of minutes, the door creaked open and she emerged, wearing my t-shirt over her slender body.

“I saw your hairbrush on the vanity counter. I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed it,” she said, self-consciously touching her hair. I thought to myself that her hair was the color of a sunset.

“Of course not, just help yourself to anything you need.”

Cate got into my bed and looked over at me as I undressed to my boxer briefs and then prowled over to the bed.

“You’re going to sleep in the bed with me?” she squeaked.

“I did last night, so I may as well tonight as well.” I didn’t say how much I’d enjoyed having her in my embrace, caged in my arms so that she couldn’t get away from me.

After getting under the covers and switching off the nightstand lamp, I turned toward her and pulled her into my arms. Her limbs were stiff, and she was on edge. I stroked her head, avoiding the sore area, trying to relax her. I could sense that her breathing wasn’t quite even, that she wasn’t quite at ease.

I couldn’t help nuzzling my face into her hair, the color reminding me of a glorious sunset, and inhaling her own unique scent with its subtle hint of berries.

Her curves felt so soft, and her petite body felt so fragile against my own body.

I felt an overwhelming urge to look after her, to protect her. I didn’t know what her father had gotten her involved in, but she was only twenty-one.

She had led a sheltered life and lost her mom at an early age and in a violent manner.

Fuck. I shouldn't be having these thoughts. I should be pinning her down on the bed right now, capturing her body with mine, demanding answers out of her. It was the perfect opportunity.

Her bare legs pressed against mine, and I felt her velvet breath against my naked chest. "I like seeing you dressed in my t-shirt," I said to her.

"Thanks for lending it to me. I wouldn't have anything to wear otherwise." She stiffened as she realized the implication of her words—without my t-shirt, she would have been naked in bed with me.

"I wouldn't mind you having nothing to wear," I said in a low voice.

CATE

'I wouldn't have anything to wear otherwise.' Jesus, what had made me say that?

And why on earth hadn't I protested more about him sharing the bed? The knock to the head I'd suffered must really be getting to me, or at least that was what I was telling myself.

Suddenly, I didn't feel so comfortable with him in the bed. While I was only twenty-one, he was twenty-six, and he would definitely be experienced.

As a man in our world, he was free to sleep around with as many women as he liked, and I knew every Made Man made the most of that freedom—it was only the women that were supposed to stay virgins for their wedding night.

He had tugged me onto his chest and molded me to his body. Despite his hard muscles, it was surprisingly comfortable as I rested my head against his shoulder, feeling my tension ease slightly as he stroked my hair.

I could feel his heavily muscled body stretched out beneath me, and it gave me an unwelcome reminder of his brute strength, making me shiver.

He tightened his arm around me as if to say that there was no escape from him, and I couldn't steady my breathing—it was coming too quickly.

I wished I was wearing more clothes. Alessio's t-shirt reached mid-thigh, but the fabric had ridden up in bed, putting most of my bare legs in contact with his body.

I tried to turn over in his arms so that I could put some distance between us.

"What's the matter?" he growled.

"Nothing. I'm too hot. You're like a furnace."

He let me turn around in his arms, and I tried to scoot away from him a little, but he just moved behind me and slung his thick arm around my torso and pulled me back into his firm body again. Even worse, he slung his leg over the top of my thighs. His hold felt too tight and way too intimate.

The darkness was suffocating me, and his presence was tormenting me.

Without being able to see him, my senses were heightened, and I felt every breath he breathed and every movement he made.

I felt the coarse hairs of his legs as they pressed against the back of my thighs. His breath felt hot and heavy against my neck.

His arm was tucked firmly under my breasts, and every slight movement from him against them made my nipples ache and sent frissons of electricity from my breasts down to my core.

I detected something else, and it made me hold my breath for a few seconds—I realized I could feel his erection digging into my back.

It was rock hard and felt huge—the thought completely unnerved me. I had never been this close to a man before, and I never thought this was how it would happen—while I was held captive by him.

My mind was racing, and my heart was beating too fast.

Although I had complained that he was too hot, I didn't think it was his body heat that was making me feel so clammy and flustered. Something else was generating a heat within me—within my core and within my breasts.

And I felt something else—embarrassment and shyness that he was making me feel like this. And confusion.

"Relax, cara. You don't have to be afraid of me."

I hesitated. "I don't?" He had sensed my unease—I hoped that was all he had picked up on.

He pressed a kiss to the back of my head. "Nothing's going to happen tonight. Now, go to sleep. You need your rest."

This was confusing me even more, but I wasn't going to argue with him. I lay still and waited for him to fall asleep first.

As the minutes wore on, however, I couldn't stop sleep from misting over my mind, and eventually I must have fallen asleep.

And that night, I had no more nightmares.

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CHAPTER 10

ALESSIO

The next morning, I got up early, leaving Cate asleep in bed, and headed down to the gym room in our mansion.

Part of the ground floor had been converted into our gym, holding our fitness equipment and weights, as well as having a large area for fight and knife training. Marco, Camillo, and I trained there every day, and even Danio trained here most days in preparation for his initiation into the Fratellanza. When our siblings were younger, it meant that Marco and I had to be able to train without being too far away from the kids in case they needed us.

This morning Marco was already in the gym, and his first question to me was what I expected. “Have you got anything out of the girl yet?”

“Cate,” I replied.

“What?”

“Her name’s Cate,” I said shortly.

“Whatever. What has she told you?”

“Not much so far, but I’m working on it.”

“For God’s sake, Alessio, you said you could get the information out of her.”

“And I can. It’s just that the concussion has left her memory a bit foggy. The doctor said things should come back to her once her headaches subside.” Even as I said it, I knew it sounded like a feeble excuse. If my Capo knew I had spent the night in the same bed as her, he’d be even more concerned.

“Her father hasn’t come around yet after his surgery and is currently on a life support machine. The FBI is snooping around trying to get to the bottom of the deaths caused by our drugs, poking their noses into places I don’t want them looking into. We need her to talk, and we need her to talk now. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll do it myself.”

“No, let me try one more time. If she doesn’t talk this time, I’ll take her into the garage myself.” The garage was the best place to make our enemies talk. This time, I might need to resort to some more severe methods of interrogation.

But I wouldn’t let Marco do it. It had to be me. I knew what had to be done. It was business, and nothing came between me and our business—and nothing came between me and my brothers.

I got on with my usual workout routine, however my mind wasn’t really on it. Afterward, I took a shower in the bathroom attached to the gym rather than going back up to my bedroom. I knew I was trying to delay the inevitable.

After my shower, I couldn’t hold off any longer. Marco was watching me closely, and I wouldn’t let him down. He was my brother and my Capo, and the Fratellanza always came first with us.

As I reached my bedroom and opened the door, Cate was just coming out of my bathroom and was wrapped in a white towel. She had just showered, and I could see stray droplets of water clinging to her perfect skin. I felt my loins stir, but I knew I couldn’t think about that now.

CATE

“Here’s some more of Debi’s clothes for you to wear,” said Alessio, handing me a pair of white denim shorts and a strappy pale pink top.

“Thank you and please say thanks to your sister as well.”

“Of course. Come down for breakfast once you are dressed.”

As I put the clothes on, I wondered how much longer I would have to stay here. Once I was dressed, I followed Alessio down to the kitchen. “Do you like pancakes? I thought I would make some breakfast if you’d like?”

“Sure, that sounds good.”

I watched Alessio get the ingredients out for pancakes. “Where’s the rest of your family?”

“The others have already left for the day and Marco is in the office.”

I was glad that the Capo was elsewhere. I got the feeling that otherwise he might be demanding some sort of explanation from me about what had happened with my father. And that wasn’t something I wanted to talk about.

Soon the pancakes were ready, and their smell was making me feel hungry. “Help yourself,” Alessio said, indicating toward the food.

“Thanks,” I said, tucking into my plate.

“How did you sleep last night?”

“Good. I feel well-rested this morning.”

“Any more nightmares?” Alessio asked, cocking his head to one side as if he were trying to analyze me.

“No, no more nightmares.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that,” he said, as he added fruit and maple syrup to his pancakes.

After finishing our food and stacking the plates in the dishwasher, Alessio suggested a walk outside. “Come on, let’s get some fresh air.” Although his voice was relaxed, I could detect a hint of steeliness behind his words.

I followed him out the door into the gardens. He didn’t hold my hand today. I sensed that he was keeping his distance from me this morning as if something else was preoccupying him.

We had been walking in the gardens for a while. “Have you remembered anything more about what the Bratva wanted with you and your father?” He got straight to the point and didn’t waste words.

I felt my insides clam up. “I’ve already told you everything I know. What my father does has nothing to do with me.”

ALESSIO

I felt my hackles rise at Cate’s lack of cooperation.

She hadn’t asked about her father since arriving here, so I decided to give her an update, although I hadn’t worked out yet what their relationship was

like and how close they were. “After being tortured, your father needed surgery, but he hasn’t come around after the operation and he’s currently on life support.”

Cate carried on looking forward as she walked, avoiding my gaze.

“Have you remembered anything else about the Russians which could help us?”

Her lips remained resolutely shut. I could tell that she wasn’t going to give me any more information willingly.

I decided to try a more direct strategy. “Your father was double-crossing the Fratellanza. He was a traitor and he betrayed us. You owe him nothing.” My tone was harsh.

“I know that.”

“So why won’t you tell me what happened?”

“I’ve already told you what I know. I was taken in my sleep, and they took us to the warehouse where you found us. I was kept tied up while my father was tortured.”

“What did they ask your father?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t in the same room.” Her tone was clearly defensive, as was her stance, with her arms wrapped around herself as she walked.

“What about when they first took you? What did they say to your father then?” I was firing questions at her, not giving her a chance to think of a lie to tell me.

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember?” I could hear my emotionless tone—this was business, and the Fratellanza was my only focus right now.

“It was… It happened really fast.”

“It’s not the sort of thing people forget—being taken in the middle of the night.”

“It’s not something I want to remember.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“I’ve told you everything I know. Everything’s been a bit of a blur since I fell down the steps and hit my head.”

“What were you dreaming about when you had your nightmare?”

“What?”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to a halt, turning her to face me. I forced myself to ignore the feeling of her soft skin and focus on the task at hand. “You heard me. Answer the question.”

“It was just a nightmare. I don’t want to talk about it.”

I grasped both her arms firmly and prevented her from walking away. “I thought you said you couldn’t remember what you dreamt?”

“Does it matter whether or not I remember it? I just don’t want to talk about it.”

I could see the emotion in her eyes, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me. “Cate, you know I have to find out what has been going on,” I said more softly.

She just looked at me stubbornly.

Damnit, I wasn’t getting anywhere with her. I didn’t know if it was because she was still struggling with her concussion and truly had some memory loss, but whatever it was, she was definitely not willing to talk to me yet.

She just needed some more time, some more persuasion from me. But Marco had said we needed the information quickly because the FBI was poking around in our affairs, and they were getting too close for comfort.

For some reason, I felt protective of her. She still seemed fragile after her time at the hands of the Russians. I carried on, trying to get her to open up about what had happened. “Cate, please talk to me and let me help you.”

“I just want to forget about what happened and forget about the Fratellanza. Why should I help you? You’re all the same—criminals with black hearts.” Her voice dripped with hate and condemnation.

I was under no illusions about the Fratellanza and I knew what I was. I had never pretended to be a good man. However, her refusal to talk to me, her refusal to let me help her, made the fury rise up in my veins. I was getting nowhere with her.

“Let’s go.” I took her arm, and we headed back toward the mansion.

But instead of going inside, I walked her past our enormous statue of the Virgin Mary toward our garage block.

“Do you need your car? Are we going somewhere?” she asked with a clear note of panic in her voice. She already knew what lay behind the cars in our garage.

“I know your father betrayed us with the Russians. I need the details—what did they say and what did they want? What was your father up to? Who else was he working with?”

But she refused to answer and stayed silent. Her unresponsiveness enraged me, as did the betrayal by her family—loyalty was everything in the Mafia.

I didn’t say anything further. I tugged her along behind me as I walked past the various sports cars and SUVs lined up in the garage toward the door at the back. I entered the security code into the keypad and the door beeped open.

I'd always thought that the beep and the sound of the door opening must sound ominous to enemies. But today it sounded ominous even to me. I was afraid of what would happen in there today.

As we entered the back area of the garage, her step faltered.

But I didn't let her stop walking and instead I kept hold of her arm and impatiently pulled her along behind me. No one came willingly into this area.

I pushed her roughly into one of the chairs. "I need you to tell me everything that happened with the Russians. What did they say and what did they want with you?" My words were precise, and my questions were calculated. I couldn't lose control around her, not of my actions and not of my emotions.

She just looked at me with her big hazel-green eyes.

My mind was a riot of conflicting emotions. The Fratellanza was my life, and I abhorred traitors. Maybe their betrayal wasn't personal, but it still stirred up an intense feeling in me, like a knife twisting in my gut. I was losing patience with Cate and her repeated refusal to answer my questions.

I slammed my hands down on the table in front of her. "What has your father been up to? What else has he been doing with the Russians?"

"I've already told you that I don't want to talk about it."

I crossed my arms in front of me as my frustration grew, and I cursed under my breath. "It's not about what you want. It's about what's good for the Fratellanza. The FBI is all over us and we can't resolve the situation with them if we don't understand what's been going on."

"So, you've brought me to your torture room to make me talk, is that it? Because mind games and sweet-talking me didn't work? You're just going to resort to what you know best—torturing the information out of people."

“It wasn’t like that—”

“Really? Getting me to sleep in your bed and comforting me after my nightmare, telling me that I was safe with you? You’ve been playing me all along just to get information out of me.”

I felt more anger swell up in my chest. “Okay, suit yourself, we’ll do it the hard way.”

I saw her eyes widen as I took out a knife from my holster.

I had tried to avoid this, but she had given me no choice.

She had stood up from her seat and had been slowly edging away from me as if she could sense the danger.

I started walking toward her. She looked at me like I was a predator prowling toward its prey.

I reached for her, but she tried to run past me. I seized her arm, and she cried out as she felt my iron grip around her forearm.

As she struggled, I twisted her around, slamming her back into my hard body. With my other hand, I drew my knife and brought it up to her body.

She still didn’t talk.

Whether it was due to fear or stubbornness, it didn’t matter anymore. She was out of time—she had to talk now. I yanked down the strap of her top, revealing her vulnerable skin.

“Please…please don’t.”

“Is this what you want? Do you want me to force the information out of you?”

“N-no,” she stammered.

I pressed the blade hard against her fragile skin, the cold of the metal threatening to pierce the warmness of her skin. “Then tell me what I want to know.”

I had wanted to avoid this—I had wanted to avoid marring her perfect skin, tainting it with my darkness.

When she didn't reply, I pressed the tip of the sharp blade harder against her shoulder, causing a drop of blood to appear.

She took a sharp breath. "Stop, please!" she whimpered.

But still she gave nothing up.

I forced myself to press the blade deeper against her, watching the stark steel slice her creamy skin as a cry rushed past her lips.

The sight of the smear of red shocked me as much as it shocked her. I watched her bring her shaking hand up to her shoulder and then blanch as she saw the crimson stain spreading across her fingers.

I hardened my heart and gripped her tightly again, preparing to make the next cut.

I felt her legs give way as the steel touched her shoulder again.

And her scream went right through me, making me shudder.

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CHAPTER 11

ALESSIO

As I restrained her with her back pressed up against my chest, I could feel her violently shaking.

“Fine, fine!” she cried out, sobbing through her words.

I could see that she was petrified, but I couldn’t stop now. This was where I needed her mind to be if she was going to talk.

“When did you first suspect that your father was involved with the Bratva?” My voice was hard and flat.

“The first time I saw or heard any Russians…it was the day when my mom and brother were killed during the so-called burglary,” she hiccupped through her tears.

Her reply threw me. “So that was when you were fourteen?” I asked in confusion.

“Yes. As soon as I turned eighteen, I moved out of my father’s home to get away from him. But I knew he was probably still doing deals with the Bratva.”

“Why didn’t you report this to my brother, Marco? He is the Fratellanza’s Capo, and your first loyalty is to him, not to your traitor of a father.”

“My first duty is to myself,” she spat back at me.

I didn’t let her animosity distract my line of questioning. “What did you mean when you said the so-called burglary?”

She took a deep breath. “It was the day the intruders killed my mom and brother.”

“Go on,” I commanded.

She looked like she might refuse, but then she started speaking. “I had been in the pantry getting some more juice…I still remember the taste of that brand of apple juice—it had always been my favorite. I heard a commotion coming from the kitchen and my mom started screaming…and some foreign-sounding men were shouting at her.”

“Had you seen these men before?” I asked softly.

She pressed her hand to the cut I’d made to her shoulder. “No, never. I could hear my brother trying to talk to them. He was seventeen by then.”

She paused as if she was going back in her memory. “I wasn’t sure what they wanted with us, but I knew that it was safer to stay hidden in the pantry. I waited, but the shouting carried on and the men were demanding to know where my father was. Then I heard my father arrive home. There was more arguing and then I heard the gunshots.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and I saw her trying to swallow down the emotion. But she failed and the tears spilled down her cheeks. I wanted to comfort her, but I couldn’t. I needed her to keep on talking.

“It…it all went silent. Then I heard my father talking rapidly and giving orders. He said something about the Russians and the Bratva. I knew that those must have been the men who had broken into our home. I opened the pantry door and found him talking on the phone. I begged him to call for an ambulance for my mom and brother, but he said it was better that the doctor came. I remember crying and telling him I was scared.”

I watched as she gulped down her sobs.

“And you know what he said back to me? He said, ‘No one is ever going to hurt you, Cate’.”

She gave a harsh laugh. “But that wasn’t right, was it? Because the men who broke into my father’s house a few nights ago and took us to that warehouse, they did want to hurt me. They wanted to hurt my father. They wanted to kill us.”

She had been gazing down at the floor, but she looked up at me now as if coming out of the past. “Since moving out, I still go back to my father’s house once a week for dinner. That’s the only way he will leave me alone and let me live by myself—in exchange for me reporting in once a week. As he says, that way he can check up on me. The only other thing I know is that during these dinners, a couple of times I’ve heard him in his office on the speakerphone with someone who sounded like they were Russian. He had the same accent as the men who broke into our home and killed my mom and brother.”

“What were they talking about?”

“What does it matter?”

“We know he was involved with the Bratva, and we need whatever details you know.” I had her pushed up against the wall now and facing me, and I held the cold blade of the knife against her arm again.

“Screw you! I want to leave now,” she cried, although the shake in her voice betrayed her fear.

“No, not until you tell me what you know,” I growled.

“Fine, I’ll tell you so that I can leave and never have to see you again! I didn’t know if it was Fratellanza business or his own sideline.”

“But you suspected?”

“Yes, especially after my mom and brother were killed, and my father pretended it was a wrong time, wrong place sort of thing—a home burglary gone wrong. But I didn’t know if he was dealing with the Russians on official Fratellanza business or for himself.”

“You knew that he might be betraying the Fratellanza.” It was a statement, not a question because I knew the answer.

“I’m a Mafia daughter. I was brought up to be obedient and not question the men of our family. I could hardly ask my father if he was up to something. I was young and I was grieving. I’d witness my mom and brother’s murder.”

I saw her turning the thoughts over in her mind. “You said my father is on life support and may not survive. I know you want him to survive for at least a short time so that he can give you all the information you need. And then you’ll kill him.”

I didn’t say anything. We both knew how this would turn out.

“If I knew the details, I’d tell you now myself so that we could just switch the life support off already. I know you’re only keeping my father alive in the hope that he will tell you what went on with the Bratva. But I just want to see him dead for what he did to my mom and brother. He killed them. And he killed my childhood. If I had any evidence, I would give it to

you right now so that you could put the bullet in his head sooner. He doesn't deserve to live after what he's done."

The grief and anger were pouring out of her, and she wasn't done yet.

"You used me." Her anger turned to me now. "I thought that maybe you liked me, but you've been playing me all along. I wish you'd just done what you planned to do that first day when you brought me into your torture room instead of playing all these messed up mind games."

I wanted to tell her that they weren't just mind games. But I could see that she hated me.

She pulled away from me, although I could see she was wobbly on her feet. "If I'm well enough to torture, then I'm well enough to go home."

"I need to see to your cut first." It wasn't that deep, but it needed looking at. It was just a surface cut, and the reality was that I could have hurt her much worse. But for some reason, I had held back.

"I'll see to it myself. I don't want anything from you."

I couldn't let her leave like this. "I'll drive you home then. You don't have your car."

"No, I don't want to go anywhere with you. I'll get the soldiers at the gate to ring a cab to pick me up."

She wrenched herself from my hold and stormed out of the garage. I watched as she hurried up the driveway towards the gates.

I got my phone out and rang the soldiers on perimeter duty and told them to call her a cab and to have Dr. Cotrone meet her at her apartment to treat her wound.

I also told them to make sure that she got back to her apartment safely and then to keep watch over her and report back to me regularly. She wouldn't get away from me that easily, and in the meantime, I had an

extreme need to know exactly what she was doing during every minute of every day.

After putting my phone down, I tried to calm myself.

I was still holding the knife.

I dropped it and let it clatter to the ground.

I couldn’t believe that I had hurt her, that I had marked her beautiful skin.

And I also couldn’t believe that I’d felt so conflicted. My first duty was to the Fratellanza, so why had I held back? Would I have been able to go through hurting her if she’d continued resisting?

All these doubts were swirling through my mind. I shook my head, trying to clear away the fog of confusion.

I had gotten the information we needed from her, but I was still raging.

I wasn’t angry with her. I was angry with myself.

She was right—I had been trying to manipulate her. And treating someone like her in that way made something that felt very much like guilt seep into my conscience.

Fuck. I felt like I needed to kill someone or at the very least, beat the hell out of them.

As I went back into the mansion, Marco came out of the office. “Ovidio has woken up. I’m headed down to the clinic now to question him. Danio has also hacked some information from the computers of the Bratva, proving that Ovidio was acting with the Russians.”

I took a look through what Danio had found. He was an IT genius. If he wasn’t already going to become a Made Man with us, he probably would have become a professional hacker.

The information he had hacked, together with what Cate told me, gave us enough evidence to know for certain what had gone on. Ovidio would not

be able to argue with this.

“I’m coming to the clinic too,” I told Marco.

“Okay, let’s go.”

We took Marco’s car, and on the way to the clinic, I kept thinking about Cate’s words. About her accusation that I had used her.

In this life, I did a lot of things that didn’t make me a good man, but today I regretted what I had done to Cate and that was a strange emotion for me.

When we reached the clinic, we headed straight to Ovidio’s room and laid out what we knew to him. After setting out the facts, Marco glared at him in fury and with his fists clenched. “Does loyalty mean nothing to you? Why the hell did you do it?”

“Why do any of us do anything in this life? It’s the money. Everything you do is for money. Everything I do is for money. What’s the difference?”

“The difference? The difference, you fucker, is that we don’t put our family in harm’s way. You sacrificed your own wife and son,” I spat.

“We found the money you got from the Bratva. They’ve made you quite a wealthy man. What a shame you won’t be around to spend it,” Marco said. It hadn’t been hard for Danio to find the money. He located an offshore account, and the money traced back to the Russians.

“But you are a clever man. I’m sure there is more than one account, isn’t there? You wouldn’t have all your eggs in one basket.” Marco grabbed a pad of paper and shoved it toward him with a pen. “Write down the details of where the rest of the money is.”

He hesitated. But I didn’t hesitate. I drew my knife from my holster and drove it into him. He shrieked in agony. I had aimed my knife into one of his injuries.

When he didn’t respond, I lifted my mouth into a smirk and twisted the knife into his gut.

“Fuck, okay, stop! You can have it—the money is yours.”

“As if the money matters to us. We have more than enough. It’s the fact that you betrayed us,” said Marco.

“It’s the only thing I have to give you now.”

“You have something else,” I said slowly.

“Whatever I have is yours. Just name it.”

“I want your daughter,” I growled.

“What?”

“You heard.”

“What for?”

“To marry her. I want to make her mine.” I saw Marco looking at me, but I kept my gaze focused on Ovidio. Cate had been my captive, and I could have just taken her in my bed then. But even then, I’d known that I wanted something more from her—I wanted to make her completely mine. I’d felt a hint of these emotions the first time I’d held her in my arms on that day when we rescued her from the warehouse. Her small body had felt so fragile and vulnerable in my arms, and since then, I’d felt an overwhelming need to have her, keep her and protect her.

“Have her,” replied Ovidio without hesitation. “I’ll give you whatever you want. I’ll give you my daughter in exchange for sparing my life.”

“I thought you’d agree. I’ve had a contract drawn up.” I already had an engagement contract drawn up. In the Mafia world it was customary to have an engagement contract signed by both parties. An engagement was usually a formal business arrangement, and the contract signified the joining of the two families.

Usually, the prospective bride and groom would sign the contract, but in this case, I would get Ovidio to sign on behalf of his daughter. I didn't think she would be willing to sign the contract of her own accord.

"Sign it." I handed over the contract, and he hastily signed it with a shaking hand. The little weasel would do anything to save his own skin, even give away his daughter to anyone who asked.

After he had signed, I took the papers from his hand.

Then I took out my revolver and killed him.

As I looked at his lifeless body, I recited the words every Made Man said upon a death: "Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte."

I thought about the meaning of those words: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.'

The prayer was said as much for myself as for the dead man in front of me.

***

Back at home, Marco faced me across the desk in our office.

"So, you want the Russo girl?"

"The contract is signed. She's mine now." My tone was hard. I hadn't consulted my Capo about this, but nothing was going to make me change my mind.

He looked at me for a few moments before reaching for the decanter and pouring us each a glass of whiskey. "As long as you know what you're

doing.”

We both raised our glasses. “To the Kings of Chicago,” said Marco.

“Long live the Kings,” I replied.

It was our usual toast and was Marco’s way of showing me he’d support me with this marriage idea, even if he didn’t fully agree with it.

As I knocked back my drink, I savored the taste in my mouth…and let my mind wander to the girl who would soon be my bride.

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CHAPTER 12

CATE

It was the day of my father's funeral.

Despite my father now being a persona non grata, there was a huge turnout—because everyone wanted to gawk at my grandmother and me, wondering if we would break with the shame of my father being a traitor.

I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

My uncle, Uberto Russo, was at the funeral. He was my father's brother. My father had no living sons, meaning that my uncle would take over my father's position and become a Captain in the Fratellanza.

The service and burial were brief. After all, there was not much good that could be said about a traitor.

We returned to my uncle's house for refreshments afterward. It was being held at his house because he was the new Captain. As people mingled, I

hugged my drink closely to my body as if such a small object could protect me from everyone's stares and gossip.

I also tried to avoid Alessio, which was difficult given his overbearing presence.

He was wearing a black Brioni suit and a black tie, the jacket hugging his muscles like a second skin. Brioni and black: the typical Mafia uniform.

Although his suit was obviously expensive, there was something untamed about him, and that sent a shiver through my body.

He towered above most of the other people here and I felt his eyes tracking me as I moved around the room trying to avoid the worst of the gossips. I knew that anyone I spoke to would later enjoy telling others about my every word and reaction. They would analyze anything I had said and break it apart to find any hint of upset or shame.

I looked around me at my uncle's old-fashioned house. The furniture was dark and gloomy, matching my mood.

Alessio appeared in front of me as I stood with Nonna and my uncle. I quickly looked around myself, but he had me cornered and there was no way to escape him.

He looked into my eyes. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Like hell you are," I replied.

"Cate, you will apologize!" my uncle admonished me. "That's no way to talk to the Consigliere of the Fratellanza."

From what I knew of my uncle, he was as much of an evil monster as my father was. I'd happily tell my uncle and Alessio to go screw themselves, but I didn't want to make a scene today. And more importantly, I didn't want to upset my grandmother any further.

The news that her oldest son was a traitor had devastated her. The Fratellanza had been her life. My grandfather had given his life for the Fratellanza, but that mattered to no one now that her son had betrayed them.

“We should talk now,” Alessio said to my uncle.

“Yes, of course. Cate, come to my office.”

“What for?” I asked, blinking rapidly.

“You’ll see,” said my uncle cryptically. When I didn’t move, my uncle added, “Come—now.”

We headed into my uncle’s office. He went and sat behind his desk, sitting back and raising his fingers in a steeple. He regarded me carefully. “Before his death, your father agreed to your engagement and marriage.”

“I…I don’t understand. To whom?” I asked in both confusion and alarm, my mind desperately trying to understand what was happening.

“To me,” answered Alessio.

“What?” I blurted out as I felt the blood drain from my face.

My uncle carried on. “An engagement can’t come as too much of a surprise to you, Cate. I know your father had spoken to you recently regarding the need to marry soon.”

“But…to him?” I said, looking at Alessio, my heart beating too rapidly. My mind flashed back to what he’d done to me in the garage block—he was a monster.

“Your father had already signed the engagement contract,” my uncle declared.

“But why him?” My voice was faint as my eyes darted to Alessio.

My uncle’s eyes bore into me. “It has been suggested as a way of repairing the bond between our families after your father’s betrayal.”

So, there we had it. I was expected to pay for my father’s actions.

However, even in our world, the woman is asked to consent to an arranged marriage. I hadn't been consulted before the engagement contract was signed.

"My father signed the contract without even speaking to me about it. This isn't an arranged marriage. It's a forced marriage. I won't do it."

My uncle slammed his fist onto his desk, making me jump. "You owe it to the Russo family. Your father's betrayal could sink us all," he snarled.

I couldn't have cared less about the rest of the Russo family, and my expression made that clear.

But my uncle knew my Achilles heel. "Think about what it would do to your grandmother," he said in a foreboding tone.

I stilled. Nonna had been knocked sideways by my father's death. The disgrace of her oldest son was a severe blow to her. Since his death, she had been looking unwell and I could sense the huge stress she was under, despite her attempts to hide it.

I couldn't let my grandmother suffer any more, I wouldn't put her through that. I would go through with this marriage only for her, not for any other member of the Russo family.

When I didn't say anything further, Alessio knew he had won this battle. As if it had been a fair fight to begin with.

"We will marry in two weeks."

"I'm in mourning for the next twelve months. It would be in bad taste to marry so soon after my father's death and burial." I didn't really care about the mourning period, but it gave me an excuse to delay the wedding.

"No one will bat an eyelid," Alessio replied, his eyes soulless. "They'll know the reason for the marriage."

Yes, they would, I thought. Everyone would know that I was paying for my father’s sins.

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CHAPTER 13

CATE

“I’m enjoying planning the wedding,” my grandmother said. “It gives me something to do to keep my mind off your father and everything that’s happened.”

“With our family being in mourning, at least it will be a small wedding,” I replied. What I really meant was that there would be fewer people to witness my humiliation. I wouldn’t have been able to face everyone in the Fratellanza being invited and gawking at me, knowing that I was being forced to marry to pay for my father’s sins.

“The Consigliere of the Fratellanza is marrying. The only person more powerful in the Fratellanza is his brother, the Capo. It is an important occasion. Some are put out that they are not being invited, but no one would dare say so openly.”

I looked down at the ring.

“You are a lucky girl marrying the Consigliere. That ring is beautiful. Not only does he have money, he has good taste.”

“He sent it via a courier—how romantic,” I said with sarcasm. But then, nothing in the Mafia world was about romance. It was all about business, alliances, and power.

The ring was three brilliant cut diamonds set in a row upon a band of platinum. It caught the light every time I moved my hand, and I still couldn’t get used to the feel of it. I still couldn’t get used to the fact that I would be married in less than two weeks.

My grandmother carried on chattering about the arrangements. “The church is booked and both families have agreed there will be no reception. Whatever the circumstances, a reception would be unseemly, having held a funeral only two weeks prior. Your poor father, God bless his soul.”

Given that the wedding was to be low-key, I would also be spared the humiliation of my husband being asked to confirm to both our families that I had been a virgin for him.

I shuddered as I thought about it—I would be spared this tradition, but I would still be expected to bleed on my wedding night.

I bought the wedding dress yesterday. I chose the first one I tried on. It was beautiful but, in all honesty, I couldn’t care less about the dress I wore.

The bouquet was also taken care of. In keeping with Italian tradition, my flowers would be sent on the morning of the wedding from my future husband.

Husband. I still couldn’t get used to it. I had tried to distance myself from the Mafia world, from the criminal world, from the violent bloodbath. I had a job, my own apartment, and friends from outside the Fratellanza.

But now I was being dragged back into the Mafia world, back into a life I swore I would never live again.

Alessio hadn't mentioned my job yet. Until he did, and I was sure he would, I would carry on working. I wondered how long it would take him to act like a dictator and tell me I could no longer work.

I loved my job working at the school. I knew I would quickly get bored with being a Mafia wife and the limited scope of the role—looking pretty, attending coffee mornings with other wives, and paying my respects to the families of the dead.

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On the day of the wedding, I woke to the sound of rain drumming against my bedroom window.

They said rain on your wedding day was a sign of good luck, but I wasn't sure anything could help me now.

We started to get ready late morning. The ceremony was in the early afternoon. There was no hair stylist or make-up artist here today. It wasn't that sort of wedding, and instead, my grandmother helped me get ready.

My mom should also have been here, I thought, briefly closing my eyes.

Nonna put her hand on my arm. "I know you are thinking of your mom and brother. They'll be looking down on you from heaven, along with your father."

As if my father would be in heaven, I thought. We all knew he would be burning in hell for all his sins. For every crime he had committed, for every

life he had taken. But I couldn't think about my family now, especially not my mom, or that would be my undoing today.

My dress was an elegant affair: ice white, with long sleeves and a fitted skirt flaring out into a train. The main detail of the dress was its cut-out back. Nonna helped me put my hair up in an elegant chignon and to fix the long, plain veil in place. "You look beautiful. Alessio Marchiano won't know what's hit him."

Nonna handed me a box. "Look, the bouquet from Alessio has arrived." I opened it to see a tasteful arrangement of pale pink roses. I was glad it was not an over-the-top arrangement. At least Alessio had got that right.

When it was time to leave for the church, Nonna accompanied me in the car. She sat by my side and held my hand.

We arrived at the church, and my uncle was waiting for me at the entrance. He was giving me away. In fact, he couldn't wait to hand me over, as he hoped giving me to the Marchiano family would help heal the rift between our families caused by my father's treachery.

My grandmother fussed around me, straightening my dress and veil as I stood with my uncle at the top of the aisle, waiting for the music to begin.

I held my head high and focused my eyes straight ahead. I wouldn't cower in Alessio Marchiano's presence. I was doing this to protect my family.

On my side of the church, there were only two people–my uncle's wife and my grandmother.

On Alessio's side of the church were his siblings. There was his older brother, Marco, the Capo of the Fratellanza, and he had at his side his pregnant wife, Juliana. His brother, Camillo, looked uncomfortable in his

tuxedo, pulling the tight collar away from his muscled neck. Alessio's two youngest siblings, Danio and Debi, were also sitting in the pews.

As I proceeded down the aisle, Juliana gave me a sympathetic look. She had been kidnapped on her wedding day and by all accounts had not an easy time of it at the hands of Marco Marchiano.

When I reached the altar, my uncle placed my hand in Alessio's. I could have avoided Alessio's gaze, but instead I sent a scowl in his direction, meeting his stormy eyes.

I then looked toward the priest as he began the wedding ceremony. Father Ugolino was the priest at the church frequented by most of the Fratellanza. It would be pointless to expect any help from him. I wouldn't be the first reluctant bride he had encountered.

"Alessio and Caterina, have you come here to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?"

Alessio replied, "I have."

Then it was my turn to answer. Father Ugolino using my full name of 'Caterina' made me freeze. My father had been the only person to call me 'Caterina', but it wasn't that which floored me. 'Caterina' had been my mom's name. And hearing it brought back memories which I always fought so hard to keep under the surface.

I was finding it difficult to speak. I swallowed the lump in my throat so that I could force the words out. I had no choice but to reply, "I have."

"Are you prepared, as you follow the path of marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live? And are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his church?"

Alessio replied in a firm voice, "I am."

I tried to make my voice come out strong, but it faltered as I replied, “I am.” Quite honestly, given the haste of this marriage, I hadn’t even given a thought to children yet.

“Please join your right hands,” instructed Father Ugolino. We turned to each other, and I listened to Alessio making his vows. It didn’t seem real.

“I, Alessio, take you, Cate, to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love and honor you all the days of my life.” I noticed that he had called me ‘Cate’ rather than ‘Caterina’, confusing me. I wondered if he had picked up my reaction to hearing my mom’s name.

Then it was my turn, and I took a deep breath to fortify myself. “I, Cate, take you, Alessio, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

“Do you have the rings?” requested Father Ugolino.

I blinked rapidly. I hadn’t even considered the wedding bands but, of course, Alessio had already thought of this and supplied both rings. He wasn’t going to let something as simple as a wedding ring delay this marriage.

The priest blessed the rings. When I forgot to offer my hand to Alessio, he snatched up my fingers, and I watched as he slid the band onto my fingers.

“Cate, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He had called me Cate again.

It was my turn to give Alessio his wedding band. I was sure my heart was about to burst out of my chest. “Alessio, receive this ring as a sign of my

love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

When Father Ugolino announced that Alessio could kiss his bride, my eyes widened. I hadn’t thought about this part.

Before I could protest, Alessio firmly pulled me toward him and placed his lips on mine. I froze and kept my mouth firmly closed, but that didn’t stop him from giving me a self-satisfied smirk as he pulled away.

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CHAPTER 14

CATE

After I'd said goodbye to my grandmother and pointedly ignored my uncle, we headed back to the Marchiano estate.

We pulled up outside the mansion, which was familiar to me after the couple of days I had spent here previously. I wondered if I should say a prayer to the Virgin Mary as we passed her statue making our way to the entrance of the mansion, but I doubted that even she could save me now.

As we all made our way into the house, I heard a very distinct bark. "What was that?" I asked Alessio as I ground to a halt.

"It's just the dog," he replied.

"What dog?"

"Juliana's dog, Mr. Fluffy. Didn't you meet him the last time you were here?"

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t even know that Juliana had a dog.”

“I guess you were only here a couple of days, and you did spend most of your time up in my bedroom. Don’t worry, Mr. F is just a harmless ball of fur.”

But Alessio’s words didn’t mollify me. I really didn’t like dogs and had a bit of a phobia about them.

“Nobody said anything about a dog.”

“Believe me, that’s how I felt when I first met him,” drawled Marco. That hardly reassured me.

“He’s huge.” I eyed the dog warily.

“He’s a Chow Chow dog,” said Juliana proudly. “The thick fur makes them look even bigger. But he’s honestly a softy.” Juliana was holding him back by his collar, but he was eyeing me up like I was a piece of meat. “He loves new people, and he just wants to meet you.”

“Well, perhaps later. I thought I’d go up first and change my clothes.” I slowly edged towards the staircase while keeping my eyes firmly on the animal.

“I’ll come up with you,” said Alessio, looking at me like I was slightly crazy.

Alessio showed me to his bedroom, although I already knew the way there. My cheeks flushed as I remembered our kiss in there—I knew that he would expect more than a kiss tonight.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go out and deal with some business. There’s been lots of fallout from all the bad drugs that have been circulating and I need to sort some things out.”

“Fine, I’d rather be by myself, anyway.”

“Okay, well, Juliana is around if you need anything.”

I didn’t reply. There was nothing to say.

My bags were already waiting for me in Alessio’s bedroom. Two of my uncle’s soldiers had brought my belongings and car over this morning.

Once Alessio had gone, I grabbed a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and changed into them. My car keys were on the dresser, plus my purse. I reached for my purse and got out my cellphone, but it was dead. I’d forgotten to charge it.

I searched through my bags for my phone charger. I couldn’t find it, so I tipped whole bags out in my frustration, not caring about the mess it was making in Alessio’s bedroom. After all, it was my bedroom now as well. If Alessio didn’t like my mess, he could divorce me and I could go home back to my own apartment.

I rummaged through my belongings, but the charger still didn’t turn up. Damn, I hadn’t brought it with me. I had packed the bare minimum, given the lack of time. I’d forgotten my phone charger, and I knew exactly where it would be—it would be plugged in next to my nightstand.

I grabbed my car keys and decided to go and get it. I went downstairs to the living room. Danio and Debi were reclined on the couches and watching a movie. “Hey Cate, do you want to watch a movie with us?” asked Debi.

“I’d like that, but maybe later.” I saw Juliana sitting on the floor nearby and said to her, “I’m just heading back to my apartment to collect a couple of things.”

“Okay, well let me know if you need anything.” Juliana was playing with her dog, so I kept my distance from her.

“Um, ok, I’ll see you later then.”

ALESSIO

When I got home that evening, Cate had still not returned from her apartment.

Of course I knew that she had gone back to her place. The perimeter guards had notified me as soon as she left the Marchiano estate, plus I was constantly monitoring the tracker inside her.

The control I had over her made my cock harden to steel, particularly when I thought ahead to the pleasures her body would give me tonight. She now had no way to escape me—not now, not ever.

I went up to my bedroom to shower and was greeted by the sight of clothes and belongings strewn all over the hardwood floor. Cate had obviously been unpacking, or her version of it. I felt my blood pressure rise.

I hated mess and disorder. Which was ironic since the life I led in the Mafia world involved a lot of mess: blood, politics, betrayals, and then more blood.

Just as kings were born into their roles, I had been born into my role as a Made Man. I had no escape from the Mafia except upon my death.

I had always thought that if I hadn’t been born into this life, I would have liked to have been an accountant. I had always loved math at school. Something about numbers appealed to me. They were exact and concrete and there was always a right answer. Math was methodical—there were no gray areas, no potential for mess.

But I would never leave the Fratellanza. I would never desert Marco, my Capo, or my siblings. This was my life.

I set about clearing up the mess left behind by Cate. I picked up her clothes and folded them into neat piles before putting them away in my walk-in closet. All the clothes were clean; however, none of them appeared to have been ironed. I couldn't understand why someone would wash their laundry but not iron it before putting it away.

It irked me to put away these creased clothes in my orderly closet, but I didn't have time to deal with it now. I would iron them all after work tomorrow.

I then took a shower, setting the jets to the strongest option and letting the hot needles of water pound into my bunched-up muscles. After dressing in charcoal jeans, a black shirt, and boots, I got back into my SUV and headed over to Cate's apartment. I rang the doorbell and waited.

When she answered the door, I saw that her hair was wet, telling me that she had just had a shower recently. She had put on pajama bottoms and a strappy tank top.

"Well, hello there," I said in a cold, toneless voice as I came face-to-face with my new wife.

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CHAPTER 15

ALESSIO

I couldn’t help noticing how the green in her eyes was accentuated by the dark circles under them, her make-up not quite concealing her weariness.

“Hi,” she murmured. Well, at least she was still talking to me.

“I had expected to find you at the mansion, Cate, but instead I was greeted by what looked like someone had ransacked your belongings. I thought I would check to see that you are alright.”

“I’m not coming back to your mansion,” she said quickly. “I don’t like the dog.”

“Really? The dog?”

“Yes. I don’t like dogs.”

I raised one eyebrow at her.

“I was chased by a dog once when I was little, okay? I was at the park with my mom. I was running around and then this dog started running behind me. I tried to get away from it, but it just kept chasing me. It was huge and kept barking wildly and I was terrified it was going to attack me. The owner afterward apologized and said the dog was just playing. But it scared the living daylights out of me, and I haven’t liked dogs since then.”

“I’m not the biggest fan of Juliana’s dog either, but he’s pretty harmless,” I said dryly.

She bit her lower lip. “I don’t want to live in a house with a dog.”

I could tell that she wasn’t telling me the full truth. She might be scared of dogs and what she said had really happened to her when she was young, but I knew that wasn’t the reason she didn’t want to live in the mansion.

The real reason was that she didn’t want to live with me. She was trying to put some distance between the two of us. It pissed me off, but I wasn’t going to argue with her about it.

I was still standing at the front door. “Fine, you can live here.” My voice was emotionless—I wasn’t going to let her know how much this bothered me.

“I can stay in my own apartment?” Her voice heightened in surprise, as if she hadn’t expected me to concede so easily.

“You obviously feel happier here, so why not?” My bride was playing games with me. I could feel my blood pressure rising again and I clenched my jaw.

“Okay, um…well, goodbye.”

She went to shut the door, but I put my foot out and the door bounced against it, preventing her from closing it. I pushed past the door and forced my way into her apartment.

“What are you doing?” she cried out, her eyes wide with panic.

“What does it look like? I’m going to spend the night here with you.” My tone was hard, and I fixed my gaze on her, letting it travel from her face flushed pink from her shower, down to her beautifully rounded breasts under her thin, strappy top.

“What do you want with me?”

“I would have thought that was obvious given that I’m your husband now.”

“Are you going to hurt me?”

I looked at her thoughtfully. “Not yet.”

She looked at me in alarm. “You’ve proved your point. Everyone in the Fratellanza knows that I have been made to pay for my father’s betrayal. I’ve married you, but I’m not living with you. So please leave or I’ll call the police.”

“And say what? I’m your husband now.” I closed the door behind me.

“You may be my husband by law, but you’re not welcome here. This is my apartment, and I don’t want you here,” she said as she backed into her living room.

“You know that the Fratellanza doesn’t involve the police in our matters. Or it will bring trouble to the doorstep of you and your family.”

“I’m not part of the Fratellanza anymore. I left that life behind when I moved out of my father’s home.”

“You’ll always be a part of the Fratellanza,” I say harshly as I stalked toward her.

When I had almost reached her, she wrapped her arms around her torso as if to put up a barrier against me. “Go or I’ll scream. The neighbors will hear me and come help me.”

“You won’t scream. You don’t want anything to happen to your nice neighbors, do you now?” My words were deadly soft, but she knew I meant what I said. “I’m here in your life for good, so you should get used to it.”

She made a run for the front door.

I caught her wrist, and she cried out as I wrenched her back toward me. I roughly grasped her arms and marched her into the bedroom.

This was the first time I was touching her since kissing her at the church ceremony, and this wasn’t how I’d imagined it would be. I didn’t know exactly how I’d thought this would go, but I knew I wasn’t going to stand for her defying me.

She kept struggling as I dragged her into the bedroom, her proximity to me making me inhale her sweet scent with its trace of berries.

I spun her around to face me, keeping a tight grasp on her. “Stop struggling! I’m not going to do anything to you—I don’t expect anything from you yet.”

She was panting from exertion, and I watched her eyes dart around in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Despite her attempts to appear strong, I knew that she was still probably afraid of me after what I’d done to her in the garage block. “I just want us to spend time together.”

“Doing what?” she asked warily.

“We can just sleep in the same bed—you know, like before.”

“You only want to sleep…and nothing else?”

“Yes, for now. Come on, let’s go to bed.”

I could tell she wasn’t sure if she believed me. “Sleep and *nothing else*?” she repeated.

“Sleep and nothing else.” I ran my hand through my hair. This wasn’t how I’d expected my wedding night to go. “Come on, get in,” I said gruffly as I turned the comforter down. Her struggles had turned me on, but I wouldn’t go back on my word to her.

As she got in, I undressed down to my boxer briefs, neatly folding my clothes and placing them on top of the dresser next to a pile of sketches which I assumed Cate had drawn.

“Look, I’m grateful you saved me from the Bratva. Please just go now and you can have the marriage annulled. You’ve made your point. Everyone knows now that my family is at the mercy of the Marchianos after what my father did.”

I sharpened my dark gaze on her. “You know it’s not just about that. We both know you were attracted to me when you stayed at the mansion. And I’m attracted to you. So why deny it? Why deny yourself something that could be good and give you pleasure?”

When she didn’t respond, I said in a low voice, “Let me give you pleasure.”

“No, we’re not doing that.”

It was hard holding back. But she was my wife now, and I would give her time.

“Fine, let’s just go to sleep.” I got under the covers, and she turned away from me.

I bit back my frustration—Christ, what fresh torment was this? I wasn’t used to women denying me and I had never thought I would be in this position with my bride.

I told myself that I needed to be patient with her. She didn’t trust me after what had happened. I had tried to emotionally manipulate her to get

information out of her, and then I had hurt her in the garage.

I didn’t touch her that night. As I waited for her to fall asleep, I gazed around her bedroom, trying to learn more about her. I noticed quite a few of her belongings, clothes, and sketches lying around—obviously tidiness wasn’t her strong point. Also on the wall was a framed drawing of a woman who had some of the same features as Cate, and I guessed it was her mom.

Cate took a long time to fall asleep and once she had, I allowed myself to pull her into my arms and sink into sleep myself.

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CHAPTER 16

CATE

The next morning, as soon as I was awake, I sensed that Alessio was no longer there.

I thought about calling the police, but I didn't. Alessio was right—I couldn't bring trouble to the doorstep of my family. Apart from my uncle, I had other uncles and cousins in the Fratellanza, and I couldn't let the police start sniffing around them.

When I saw Alessio later, I would have to try another avenue or appeal to his better nature, that is, if he had one.

He could have any woman he wanted. He was a Made Man, and he wouldn't want to be stuck with just one woman.

After showering, I wrapped my white robe around myself and headed for the kitchen. As I poured some cereal into a bowl for my breakfast, I

grabbed my cell phone to call Nonna.

It was dead. Even though I'd come back to my apartment yesterday to get my charger, what with one thing and another, I never actually got around to plugging my phone in. So instead, I picked up the landline and dialed the number of my father's house.

After the first ring, Nonna picked up the phone. I always called her every morning at breakfast time. I imagined she was particularly keen for my call today to hear how things were going after the wedding yesterday.

"Cate, darling, are you okay?"

"Hi Nonna. Yes, I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm good. Where are you calling from?" I could hear the puzzlement in her voice. "Isn't this the phone number from your apartment? Why are you calling from there?"

"My cellphone wasn't charged, so I had to use the landline instead."

"But why are you back at your apartment? Mamma mia, don't tell me you've already left him!" exclaimed Nonna in shock.

"No, it's nothing like that, but we stayed here last night."

"You shouldn't be back at your apartment. The Marchiano mansion is your home now. I hear it is one of the finest homes in Chicago—you are a very lucky girl."

"We went there yesterday. I didn't know that the Capo's wife has a dog. I don't want to live in that house with the animal. You know how I hate dogs."

"Oh, darling, is that really the reason? I know you don't like dogs, but what has really happened between you and Alessio?"

I sighed. Nonna knew me too well. When I didn't say anything, she carried on. "I know it's hard for you. It is always hard for the new bride. I

still remember how terrified I felt when I married your grandfather. Everyone had so many expectations of me, and there I was, marrying a stranger. Not only marrying him but I was also expected to warm his bed on the wedding night. But look how it turned out with your grandfather. Give it time—you will fall in love with Alessio. And he will fall in love with you."

"I doubt a man like that is capable of love."

"All men are. It just takes them a while to realize it."

"I don't think I want him falling in love with me. He's a monster."

"Men in our world have to do certain things. It's best just not to think about those things. Keep it separate from your marriage. And in time, the other things will be good as well—you know, the sex."

"Nonna!" I felt heat wash over my cheeks.

"You are lucky that he will be well-experienced in these matters."

"Oh yes, I'm really lucky that he's been able to sleep around with as many hookers as he liked."

It was a known fact that the men in our world were free to sleep around before marriage—and that they all took full advantage of this. On the other hand, we girls were expected to behave like nuns and had to remain pure, innocent virgins until our wedding night. For men it was different—it was thought that if you were old enough to kill a man, you were old enough to have sex. After all, both were acts that could produce blood.

I wondered how many women Alessio had slept with in the past. But then I mentally shook myself and told myself that I shouldn't care—he meant nothing to me.

Thank God that there would be no display of the virgin sheet this morning. Otherwise, we would have had some explaining to do.

If people had seen there was no blood on our bedsheets this morning, they would have thought that the Fratellanza's Consigliere was weak. It was thought that a Mafia husband shouldn't spare his new bride on the wedding night, no matter how painful the act might be for her. I was grateful for that small mercy. Not that I wouldn't have the whole of the Fratellanza speculating about how my wedding night had been.

"So how was the sex last night?"

"Nonna, you can't ask that!"

"What, do you think you young people invented the concept? It takes a while, but once you get to know each other, it can be very enjoyable in the bedroom. It was with your grandfather."

"Nonna, that's enough. I can't hear any more about what you did with my grandfather." This conversation was mortifying. I wasn't about to discuss what may or may not have happened on my wedding night with anyone.

"Anyway darling, you should go back to the mansion straightaway. You don't want to anger your new husband so soon."

"It's okay. Alessio said we can stay at my apartment for a bit."

"Really? I suppose it might be nice to have some privacy—you know, just the two of you. But most girls wouldn't pass up the chance to live in that fine mansion."

"You know I don't care about things like that."

"What about security, Cate? Have you told your uncle that you are staying at the apartment? He will need to send back the soldiers that were guarding you there."

"Don't worry, Nonna. Alessio already has his own soldiers spying on me. They followed me the moment I left his mansion, and I can see that they're still outside right now." I looked through my apartment window down at the

two cars that were obviously Mafia—gleaming black SUVs with tinted-out windows.

No doubt they would also follow me to work today. But I didn't mind that if it meant that I could go to my job and see the children today.

After some more casual conversation, I hung up the phone and got on with my breakfast. I was glad that I could still talk to my grandmother. She felt like the only real family I had left.

After finishing my cereal, I got dressed for work. The thought of seeing the children today lightened my heart. I loved my job, and I adored the children I looked after. I had been planning on going to college and training to be a teacher, but my marriage marked the end of that dream.

I would just have to hope that Alessio would let me carry on working for at least a while. I wondered if he had still been at my apartment this morning, would he have stopped me from going to work today?

I didn't know. And I didn't care. He wasn't here, so I was going to go to work whether he liked it or not.

I was glad to have my job to occupy my mind throughout the day. The children in my kindergarten class always lightened my heart and made me happy. They were so innocent at that age—unspoiled and looking forward to whatever life would offer them.

I busied myself with my work throughout the day, desperately trying not to think about Alessio forcing his way into my bed again tonight—and about what he might demand of me.

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CHAPTER 17

ALESSIO

I would have liked to have stayed and had breakfast with Cate, but I received a text from Marco saying that he needed to see me right away this morning.

When I arrived at the mansion, I headed straight into the office to talk to Marco.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” said Marco tersely. “We’ve got a problem.” I could tell from the tone of his voice that it was something to do with our siblings rather than a problem with the business.

“I came as soon as I could. Which one is it this time, Camillo or Danio?” I knew that it would be one of the boys. Our sister, Debi, never caused any problems—she was a little angel. And if I had to guess, I would say that it

was Camillo that had done something. Danio was a good kid, they both were really, but Camillo had the knack of getting into more mischief.

“It’s Danio.” That surprised me. “I’ve had a call from Alfonso Tocchini.”

“Let me guess, it has to do with his daughter, Carolinne.” Danio and Carolinne had been best friends since they started kindergarten. They were both fifteen and in the same class at the Italian School. The Italian School was where most of the children of the Fratellanza families went to school. They had extra security and the staff who worked there knew how to keep their mouths shut.

“You’ve guessed right,” answered Marco.

“So, what happened?”

“Danio, haul your ass down here right now!” Marco hollered up the stairs.

I watched as Danio came down the stairs slowly and stood at the bottom of the staircase, shifting from one foot to another and looking annoyed as hell.

He was fifteen years old and was still in school, although he was keen to be initiated into the Fratellanza. However, after our parents had died, Marco and I had brought up Camillo, Danio, and Debi very differently from how we had been raised by our deranged father.

Danio was impatient to join the Fratellanza, but Marco and I had decided we wanted our younger brothers to have as long a childhood as possible before entering the Mafia world. Therefore, Camillo had not joined the Fratellanza until he was sixteen, and Danio would also have to wait until he turned sixteen next year to be initiated.

“Okay, so what happened?” I asked my youngest brother.

“It was nothing. Carolinne’s dad is just blowing this up into something much bigger than it needs to be.”

Marco narrowed his eyes at Danio. “Alfonso is Carolinne’s father and has every right to make a fuss if he thinks propriety is not being followed.”

I looked at Danio, but he didn’t say anything and just scowled at us both.

It was obvious that Danio wasn’t going to be forthcoming, so instead, Marco filled me in. “Alfonso caught Danio climbing out of Carolinne’s bedroom window late last night.”

“What the hell, Danio?” I sighed.

“We were just having our movie night. Ever since Alfonso has said that Carolinne and I can’t go to the movies together, we haven’t been able to have our weekly meetup at the movie theatre, so we thought we would have it at her home instead.”

“In her bedroom, though?” argued Marco.

“Nothing happened—we were just watching a movie,” said Danio, glaring at Marco.

“You know why Alfonso put a stop to your movie nights, Danio,” I said. “He explained it to us, and I can see his point. Some people might say that it looks like you’re going on a date every week with Carolinne. Her family has already promised her in marriage to someone else and she will officially be getting engaged soon. Alfonso thinks it isn’t good for Carolinne’s reputation to be seen hanging around with another boy for long periods of time.”

“She’s my best friend. Guys and girls can be friends, you know, without screwing each other.”

“I hope you didn’t talk like that in front of Alfonso,” growled Marco.

“No, I didn’t. I just said that since we couldn’t go out to the movie theater anymore, we just thought we would watch a movie in Carolinne’s bedroom instead.”

But he and Carolinne didn’t tell her dad about their little weekly rendezvous. “Fuck, Danio, were you competing for moron of the year when you thought of that idea?” exclaimed Marco. “Danio, you help us with our Fratellanza work all the time now. You plan our drug shipments and keep our movements concealed from the authorities with all your computer hacks. But you can’t get in and out of a teenage girl’s bedroom without getting caught by her father for crying out loud?”

I looked at Danio. “And obviously Alfonso thought that maybe it wasn’t just a movie night and you had been getting up to other things with his daughter.”

When Danio didn’t respond, Marco turned to me. “So, while you were enjoying your honeymoon with your new wife last night, I was dealing with all this shit—an irate father and also Carolinne’s irate grandmother. And let me tell you, Nonna Tocchini is not a woman to be crossed, as I found out last night. Danio, you must have known after finding you in Carolinne’s room anyone’s obvious conclusion would be that you have been bedding her.”

Danio’s cheeks flamed red. “It wasn’t like that. You know we’re just friends and always have been. I wouldn’t do anything like that with her,” he spat out in anger toward Marco.

I could see that they had been arguing about this and Marco hadn’t been able to get through to Danio. Marco had a habit of getting worked up and speaking before he thought, but sometimes the kids needed a gentler approach.

Just then Marco's cell phone rang, and he looked at the screen. "That's Camillo. Damn, I need to take this call. He's gone down to one of our hotels to sort out an issue and I need to talk to him." It was obvious this discussion was over as far as Marco was concerned and he turned back to the office while Danio stomped off upstairs to his bedroom, slamming the door when he reached his destination.

Before I left, I checked in with Marco. "Do you need anything else from me?"

"No, I think we got the message across to Danio."

"You think?" I asked skeptically. "Perhaps I should try to talk to him again once he's calmed down a bit."

"Yeah, maybe that isn't such a bad idea," he muttered after considering my words. "And, for fuck's sake, give the kid a box of condoms."

Typical Marco: he would rather hand over a box of condoms than have a proper talk with our youngest brother.

Marco gathered his phone and car keys. He and I needed to visit one of our clubs today.

Before we left, he walked through to the kitchen and pressed a lingering kiss to Juliana's lips. "Please try to not burn anything today, okay?"

"Okay, honey," she replied with a grin.

Those two were made for one another, but it still puzzled me how anyone could put up with my crazy brother.

CATE

After work, I came home, and the apartment was empty.

I made myself some dinner, although I didn't have much of an appetite and I pushed my food around my plate.

By the time it was 11 p.m., Alessio hadn't come back. Maybe he'd gotten the message and realized I didn't want him here. I couldn't have made it any clearer.

I got ready for bed and put on pajama bottoms and a vest top. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I climbed in between the covers of my bed. The bed was blissfully warm, and it didn't take me long to drift off into a delicious sleep.

I was dreaming that I was swimming in the clear ocean under a warm sun. The warm water was relaxing, and I turned over to float on my back.

Suddenly I couldn't breathe.

Despite the ocean being calm, the water was holding me down. Panic was rushing through my veins. The weight of the water felt heavier as it pushed me down. I couldn't push myself back up to the surface.

I forced all my energy into my muscles and jolted up. There was a hand over my mouth. A man with dark hair merged into the night and his dark eyes burned into mine.

I wasn't dreaming any longer.

This was real.

Terror and adrenaline kicked in. I began to struggle and tried to scream.

"It's okay. It's me. Wake up."

I recognized the voice. It took me a moment to realize it was Alessio. His hand was over my mouth, preventing me from screaming. I stopped struggling and I looked up into his eyes, panting heavily.

"It's okay. I just didn't want to scare you," he said as he took his hand away from my mouth.

I just looked at him. I couldn’t say anything.

“When I got here, you were already asleep.”

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked, getting my voice back.

“I didn’t want to give you a fright when I came in. I didn’t want you to scream out and for the neighbors to hear. The walls between these apartments are paper-thin.”

“Christ, I thought you were the Bratva. I thought they had come back for me. Don’t do that! You scared the living daylights out of me.”

“I really didn’t mean to scare you.” He seemed to genuinely feel bad, but my heart was still racing.

“Jesus, what are you even doing here?” I clasped the comforter tightly to my body.

“I told you yesterday—I’ll be sleeping here from now on.”

“I don’t want you here, but if you’re going to force your way into my home, don’t scare me like that.”

“I didn’t think. I really am sorry.”

I pushed my hair back from my face. “Look, I just want to get on with my life now and forget about you and the Fratellanza.”

“I’m not going to forget you.”

We just looked at each other while he took off his boots, charcoal fitted jeans, and navy-blue top. Once he was left in his boxer briefs, he climbed into the bed beside me. I swallowed, noticing the hardness of his cock and feeling heat suffuse me.

To distract him, I said, “You never talk about your parents.”

“I know. It’s a painful topic.”

I hadn’t expected him to be some forthcoming, but what really surprised me were his next words.

“When we were teenagers, my father made me and Marco watch him kill our mom in front of us. And then Marco and I killed our father in revenge.”

Cate bolted upright in bed and looked at me. “What?”

“My father wanted to punish us, so he killed my dog and then murdered our mom.”

Cate gasped at my blunt words and put her shaking hand to her mouth. “But why? I don’t understand?” she whispered.

“I was seventeen years old, and Marco was just a year older than me. We had been initiated into the Fratellanza a few years earlier, but our father thought we were still weak and not good enough to be members of the Fratellanza. He was a sick fucker—he was truly psychotic.”

“But why kill your mom?” Her voice trailed off in confusion.

“My father sent me to kill one of his soldiers who had been cheating the Fratellanza by skimming money off our profits and keeping it for himself. Marco came with me and, on the way there, I weighed up the situation for myself and decided I didn’t need to kill the soldier. Instead, I beat him pretty badly, and I was certain that would have been enough to stop him from doing it again. When I got home, my father started raging when he realized that I had disobeyed him. He said I needed to toughen up. So, he shot my dog, Comet, in front of Marco and me.”

“Jesus...” I could hear the shock in her voice.

“That wasn’t enough for my father, though. He hated that Marco and I were close to our mom. She had been scared of our father, and as we became older and could understand her fear, we tried to protect her. We used to help our mom with taking care of our younger siblings. I was eleven when Danio was born, and then Debi was born a year later. We used to help our mom with the babies—we did whatever we could to look out for her.

Her life with our father was a living nightmare. After killing Comet, he hauled our mom in front of us. I never thought that he would kill her though…I still remember her face at that moment, the terror written all over it. I wished we could have stopped him, but he shot her in the head. When we saw our mom dead at his feet, that's when me and Marco killed him. But even that was too easy an end for that monster."

I sat in silence watching him, wishing I could say something to make him feel better.

But as there was nothing either of us could say, he pulled me down onto his chest.

"Go to sleep," he said as he wrapped his arms around me. He clasped my bare arms against his naked chest, his heat seeping into my skin and his masculine scent enveloping my senses.

A few minutes later, I moved positions and then froze as I felt his erection.

I held my breath before slightly shifting again, trying to not make it obvious what I was afraid of. My thighs were still pressed up against his body and I lay rigidly, afraid that he would pull me closer to his erection and closer to his control. Because that's what he wanted—to own me, to have me, and to control me.

I didn't want to be dragged under by him and drawn into his possession; however, my body betrayed me, and I felt my nipples harden as he shifted and my breasts brushed against his muscled chest.

I felt myself being overwhelmed by him, and my heart was beating too fast.

As if sensing that, he stroked my hair, the tender touch from his hands making me feel safer and helping to calm me.

His body felt so strong curled around mine, and as I looked down at the defined muscles of his arms around me, I let myself yield to his embrace and felt my core heat.

Would it really be so bad to give into what he wanted? To give into something physical? Would that really be giving into his power?

While these thoughts ran through my mind, I felt myself relax into him, finally falling into a blissful sleep.

***

When I woke up in the morning, Alessio was still here. My heart sank—he would notice me getting ready for work and would forbid me from going now that I was his wife.

He was lying awake and watching me intently. “Do you have to do that?” I muttered.

“I’m just enjoying the sights.”

I groaned as I disentangled myself from his arms. “You know it’s creepy to watch other people sleep, right?”

“It isn’t if they’re your wife.”

I didn’t say anything else. I watched while Alessio got up out of bed. “Come on, let’s get up and I’ll make you breakfast before you go to work.”

He was still letting me go to work? That was something I wasn’t going to argue with him about, and I bounced out of bed and felt a renewed energy.

While I showered, he made ham, cheese, and mushroom omelets for breakfast and then we sat down to eat together.

“You’re a good cook,” I said once I was a quarter of the way through my omelet. “My father didn’t even know how to toast a slice of bread.”

“I had no choice but to learn how to cook for my siblings after my parents died. Your grandmother moved in with you after your mom passed away, so I guess your father never had the need to learn.”

I carried on eating and enjoyed my food. “I normally go for a run before breakfast, but I’ll skip it this morning since I’ve already eaten.”

“You like running?”

“Yes, it wakes me up and gives me a boost first thing in the morning.”

He looked at me in a way that made me think he might want to do other things to me every morning before breakfast, the unwelcome thought making me shiver.

“Look, I have to head over to the mansion now to deal with some business. Do you want me to drive you to work?”

“No thanks, I like to drive myself.”

“Fine. My soldiers will be following you and watching you. I’ll see you later.”

I stopped my jaw from dropping. It all seemed too easy. I wondered when he would put his foot down and stop me from working. Probably when he wanted children because I was sure he would then make me stay at home to look after them.

All Made Men were desperate for sons to carry on their violent bloodline.

But children meant that we would have to have sex, and that thought filled me with dread and apprehension.

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CHAPTER 18

ALESSIO

As I drove over to the estate, I couldn't stop thinking about Cate. I wanted her to give herself willingly to me and I was frustrated that she kept trying to push me away.

However, I shoved those thoughts to the back of my mind when I reached the mansion and walked in to find Danio by himself in the living room, playing a video game on the large flatscreen TV.

"Hey, Danio. Why don't we take Mr. F for a walk outside?"

"Why? You don't even like the dog," retorted Danio. He was obviously in no better mood than yesterday.

"Humor me."

Danio shrugged but followed me outside with Juliana's dog.

We just walked for a bit, heading toward the woods. “Danio, I know you and Carolinne are best friends and want to spend time together, but it has to be done in an appropriate way that respects her father’s wishes. You kids are older now and you know Carolinne is going to be getting engaged to someone else soon. It doesn’t look good for her if she’s seen out with another boy all the time.”

“So, what, we can’t be friends anymore?”

“I’m not saying that. You just have to be more careful about how you go about it.”

“We’re in the same class at school and we sit next to each other. We always spend recess and lunch together. It’s all innocent. Everyone’s making this into something bigger than it is.”

“Marco has to balance the demands of being Capo with his role as our big brother. You know he had to take on the responsibility of Capo at a young age after the death of our parents. And at the same time, it was left to Marco and me to bring up you younger kids. Camillo was eleven then, while you were six and Debi was only five. Marco and I were only teenagers ourselves. Camillo didn’t have any problems with girls, so this sort of thing is all new to us as well.”

Danio was scowling. I knew that he was less inclined to see reason where Carolinne was concerned. He might say that they were just friends, best friends even, but I sensed that there was something deeper between them blossoming as they became older. And that was dangerous territory as far as the Fratellanza was concerned.

“Alfonso has already decided which family he needs to strengthen ties with via the marriage of his daughter. These ties between families are crucial in maintaining the strength of the Fratellanza, in building family

links and trust that goes beyond the Capo's commands. And in time, those two families will be linked by blood when children and grandchildren are born."

I could see Danio was thinking about what I was saying, so I carried on. "The Fratellanza, like any other Mafia institution, is built on trust and family. You might not like the rules, however there are aspects of this life that each one of us doesn't like. We are in this life for better or for worse, and we have to follow its rules." I paused for a moment. "You know, Danio, we're not saying that you can't see Carolinne."

"Really?" A flicker of relief crossed Danio's face. "That's what Alfonso wants—to stop me seeing Carolinne. He was talking about going down to the Italian School and telling the teachers that they are to make sure we don't associate anymore—no more sitting next to each other in class, no spending time together, and not even being able to talk to one another."

I could tell that he was really worried about this. "I'm just saying that maybe keep it a bit low-key."

"So, we can't spend any time together outside school?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm just saying don't get caught climbing out of her bedroom window again. I mean, that was a bit of a rookie move. Even Camillo hasn't ever gotten caught doing something like that. And Camillo has had a knack of getting himself into all sorts of scrapes over the years."

I stopped walking and looked at my younger brother. "Look, Camillo is smart, but you are a genius. The work you do for the Fratellanza, with the IT and computers and hacks, is crucial to our business and our success. Surely you can work something out about seeing Carolinne without raising the suspicion or wrath of her father? A father crossed is not something you want to be dealing with it."

“Or Nonna Tocchini,” added Danio. “That woman is a force to be reckoned with.”

I made my tone casual. “How are things between you and Carolinne, anyway?”

Danio looked at me, slightly uncomfortable. “What do you mean?”

“It’s hard for anyone to spend time with another person and not get really close to them. We wouldn’t be human otherwise.”

“Is that what happened between you and Cate?”

“Maybe. Probably. I really don’t know.”

“Carolinne is a great girl, but there’s nothing like that between me and her. We’re friends and that’s all.”

“Does she feel the same way?” I’d seen a couple of times the way that Carolinne looked at Danio. And it looked to me like she was falling for him. And it wouldn’t be long before he fell for her too.

“I’m pretty sure she feels the same as me—we’re best friends, that’s all.”

“You know that these weekly movie nights in her bedroom have to stop?”

“Yeah. Anyway, I reckon Alfonso will be setting up guard around his whole house now. Carolinne texted me this morning to say he’s already started installing CCTV to monitor the comings and goings around the house and he’s linking it up to his phone, plus to a screen that Nonna Tocchini can watch in the kitchen. He’s taking fatherly protection to a whole new level.”

“You need to make the time you spend with Carolinne more low-key stuff so that her father won’t have a problem with it. You can invite Carolinne over to do your homework here at the mansion. And if you want some privacy, you can go into the library. And if you want to watch a movie, you can watch a movie together.”

Danio looked at me in surprise. “What about Marco?”

“I’ll talk to him—Marco won’t have a problem with it. It’s just about what looks proper to the outside world, to the rest of the Fratellanza.”

“I don’t give a damn what the rest of the Fratellanza thinks.”

“I know you don’t, but Carolinne’s family does. And we have to follow their wishes on this. You can invite Carolinne over here. But only when one of us is around. We won’t stand over you and you can do your own thing, but you need to stay downstairs and no going into your bedroom. You know none of the staff or soldiers here will gossip. They know better than to repeat anything about the happenings in this household. But just make sure you don’t do anything in front of them.”

“Like gazing into her eyes?” Danio joked.

“Or kissing her,” I responded.

“We haven’t done anything like that,” he said quickly.

“Yeah, you haven’t done anything like that *yet*. But you might one day and I’m just saying to be careful. What does Carolinne think about all this?”

“She’s distressed that she’s upset her father and family. She wants to do the right thing.”

“She’s a good kid. Her family is really protective of her, especially after she was gunned down when she was seven years old.” Carolinne had been shot by the Russians in a drive-by shooting. She and her family had been entering a Fratellanza-owned hotel, attending a family celebration after the christening of her cousin. The bullet had hit her chest and she had required extensive surgery to repair the internal damage. Marco had only been Capo for a short while at that point.

“Yeah, probably too protective,” replied Danio.

“You can never be too protective of your family in this life,” I warned.

“So, you’ll square it with Marco so that Carolinne can come to our house?”

“I will. As long as you don’t do anything which draws the wrong sort of attention, he’ll be fine with that. Alfonso is one of our most loyal soldiers and we have to respect his wishes regarding Carolinne and her upbringing.”

I could see Danio was thinking about what I had just said.

“You know Marco loves you, right? It’s just that his position as Capo puts him in a difficult position. He can’t cross his men on family matters. Alfonso has the last word on Carolinne, whether we like it or not. Marco cares about you. He just wants what’s best for you.”

“I know. I guess he just has a hard time communicating it sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He just yells at us. He sees it as a more efficient way of getting things done,” I chuckled.

“You were always the calm one when we were growing up,” said Danio.

Yeah, I was, I thought, except for the time when Marco and I had beaten our father to death. That had been our father’s last day as the boss. And his death had signified Marco’s first day as the new Capo of the Fratellanza.

I usually didn’t let myself lose control. You had to be in control of your thoughts and emotions—otherwise, people could get under your skin and get inside your head.

I worried that Danio wasn’t guarding his emotions and that he was letting Carolinne into his heart. And that could only end in heartbreak one day. Alfonso already had his plans for Carolinne, and love didn’t come into it.

Love didn’t matter in the Mafia world. We had to marry for the good of the Fratellanza.

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After talking with Danio, I decided to head up to my bedroom and grab some more clean clothes to take back to Cate's apartment later.

I wasn't in the best of moods today. I was definitely feeling frustrated at the lack of sex with Cate so far. Holding back was killing me.

As soon as I entered my bedroom, I was met by the sight of a big fluffy mound lying sprawled in the middle of my bed.

I felt my blood pressure rise as I thought about my pristine bedsheets being covered with dog hair. Mr. F was officially Juliana's dog, but Danio and Debi spent a lot of time looking after him as well.

"Danio!" I yelled down the hallway, forgetting that I was supposed to be the calmer brother. "What the hell is the dog doing in my bed?"

Danio stuck his head out of his bedroom door. On hearing my voice, Debi's door opened and she appeared too. "You haven't been here the last couple of nights. Mr. Fluffy misses you," said Debi in her gentle voice. "I think it makes him feel closer to you by sleeping on your bed."

Although I felt no qualms about shouting at my brothers, I couldn't bring myself to yell in front of Debi, so I let it go. I huffed and headed back to my bedroom, shooing the dog off my bed and out of my room. "Go and find someone who actually appreciates you covering them with all your fluff," I grumbled.

I stripped the bedsheets and put on clean ones, and I also vacuumed the bedroom while I was at it. I stood back and surveyed my handiwork, but something didn't feel quite right.

Then I remembered Cate's un-ironed clothes in my closet. I groaned and got out the ironing board and set to work on straightening out all her clothes.

***

When I got back to the apartment that night, Cate was already in her bedroom brushing her hair after washing it.

She was wearing panties with a silk camisole top. She had removed her make-up, making her look younger than her twenty-one years. Even bare-faced, she looked as sexy as hell, tormenting me even further.

"I need a shower," I said, heading for the bathroom.

I started the hot water running and stripped off my clothes while the water heated. Once it was hot enough, I stepped under the spray and soaked my body before reaching for the body wash.

I couldn't help remembering when I had soaped up Cate's naked body in my shower on the day we had rescued her from the Russians. Her breasts had been enticingly heavy, and her nipples had been rock hard, practically begging to be sucked on.

The thought of my hands on her bare body made me rock hard as I soaped up my cock. What I wouldn't do for a repeat performance right now.

I closed my eyes and the thought of Cate waiting for me in the bedroom, which made me even harder and made my balls ache. I couldn't help thinking of her laying in my bed, although I knew she wouldn't let me near her like that yet.

I groaned. I had never felt this frustrated in my life. I wasn't one to hold back—when I needed sex, it was easy enough to find a willing woman in one of our clubs or hotels. However, I hadn't slept with anyone since meeting Cate. I didn't want anyone else—no one would be as sweet as her.

I opened my eyes as I rested my palms against the tiled wall of the shower, looking down at the floor while the hot water drummed into my bunched-up shoulder muscles. I was relishing the heat of the water and the needles of spray pulsing against my body, but I needed something else.

I clenched my fist and brought it up to my dick. I pumped my tight fist up and down my hard rod, imagining that my hand was her wet pussy gripping me as I pounded into her relentlessly. The soap made my dick glide through my hand, just as her lush pussy juices would lubricate my cock as I pounded her tight hole.

I let my mind wander to images of her nakedness, of how she had looked in my shower on that first day, of how her pussy had felt when I had soaped it for her. Each stroke of my fist brought an almost painful pleasure to my cock, bringing me closer and closer to release.

As I ran my fisted grip over my dick, I saw a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye.

I looked up and saw Cate peeking around the open door and gawking with wide eyes at my naked body.

And her eyes were rooted on my cock.

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CHAPTER 19

ALESSIO

Cate gasped when she saw I'd caught her looking at my nakedness, and through the doorway I saw her hurry across the room and scramble into bed, pulling the comforter over her blazing cheeks.

Well, well, my little virgin was curious, the thought pleasing me immensely. She was softening—I could see her inquisitiveness and sense her desire slowly being set alight.

Knowing her eyes had been on me made me climax swiftly, and I groaned as I pumped my thick cum onto the tiled wall, wishing that instead I was pumping it over her sexy tits. I finished washing and then stepped out of the shower. After drying myself, I didn't bother covering up with boxer briefs tonight. Why bother if she was interested in seeing me?

I walked into the bedroom to find her in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin.

“It is okay to look, you know.”

“I wasn’t looking.”

“You’re my wife now. And you’re entitled to see my body.”

“I said I wasn’t looking. I just came to get something from the bathroom.” Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

I climbed into bed beside her and ran my fingers slowly up her bare arm. “Did you like what you saw?”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“You’re teasing me. I don’t like it.”

I eased up on the teasing tone. “I mean it when I say there’s nothing wrong with looking at me, cara. I want you looking at me, and I want to look at you as well. I want to take your body one day, but only when you’re ready. I won’t rush you.”

“I wish you’d put some clothes on,” she complained.

“I wish you would take some of those clothes off,” I retorted.

It didn’t escape me that goosebumps rose up on her arm as I trailed my fingers up and down it. She wasn’t unaffected by me—however much she protested about not liking my attentions.

“I’m your husband now. I don’t mind you being interested, believe me.”

She stayed silent.

“Turn over,” I commanded.

She hesitated. “Why? What for?” A slight frown marred her delicate features, and I could see her apprehension as she wondered what I was going to do to her.

“You’re going to have to learn to obey me. I don’t like asking twice.” My voice was a low growl. “It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

She warily turned over onto her stomach and I straddled her, at the same time reaching to her nightstand for the scented oil she kept there. “I’m just going to lower your camisole straps so that I can rub your shoulders.”

She quickly tried to get back up, pressing her top to her chest. “I don’t think that’s a good idea—”

I firmly pushed her back onto the mattress. “Stop fighting me.” My voice was more severe than I intended, but my patience had been worn thin over the last few days. “You won’t like the consequences if you keep on fighting me.”

I felt her tense up under me, but I knew I could soon change that with my massage. “Don’t worry, you’re going to like this.”

I liked having her under me, her small body restrained by my powerful thighs. I slipped the thin straps of her silky top down over her slender shoulders, feeling my dick stand to attention at the erotic sight of her naked back under me.

I poured a small amount of oil into my hand and rubbed my palms together before touching my fingertips to her shoulders. She flinched slightly.

I paused for a second. “Are my hands too cold?”

“N-No,” she stammered. “They’re okay.”

I ran my fingers lightly over her shoulders, spreading the aromatic oil onto her flawless skin, enjoying the sheen of the liquid on her pale skin. I started to rub small circles onto the back of her shoulders, gradually increasing the pressure.

Her face was turned to one side and I could see her eyes tightly closed while she bit her lower lip and furrowed her brow. “Relax, cara…allow yourself to enjoy this.”

I gripped her shoulders between my fingers and thumbs and started to move my fingers rhythmically over her bunched-up muscles, feeling the knots under my fingertips, wanting to ease them and soothe her.

As I concentrated on the knotted muscles between her shoulder blades, I heard a moan escape her lips.

I felt a surge of triumph. She was beginning to loosen up and enjoy my hands on her skin.

I flexed my fingers as I continued to knead her naked skin, and as the force from my fingers increased, so did the small moans coming from her sweet lips.

I wanted to pull her camisole down all the way, but I knew that would scare her off.

Coming to an end, I wiped the excess oil off with a towel and then pulled her straps back up onto her slim shoulders, kissing the back of her neck and turning her around onto her back. “Good?”

She nodded at me.

I got into bed next to her and pulled her into my arms. Now that she was relaxed, her body was deliciously soft and pliable.

“Do you still live by the values of the Fratellanza?” I questioned her.

“What do you mean?” she asked, blushing.

“You know what I mean. Are you still a virgin?” I demanded.

“Of course I am.” Her cheeks blazed red. “Not that it’s any of your business. I may have been living away from my family, but I haven’t

forgotten my upbringing. Anyway, as if my father would have let me date anyone. He probably would have killed any guy who tried to get near me."

"Good." I was glad to hear that. The very thought of anyone else touching her made my blood boil. I would kill anyone who dared to touch her. "I want you to be mine and mine alone," I growled.

She bit her lower lip as she looked at me.

As I stroked her arm, I noticed her breathing change. As I ate her up with my eyes, for once she didn't avert her gaze.

Not taking my eyes off hers, I slowly bent my head toward her and pressed my lips against her mouth.

She stilled, but she didn't push me away, and I took that as an invitation to explore her mouth.

I laced my fingers through her hair as my tongue played with hers and enjoyed her wetness. At first, she stayed silent, but then she gave small gasps—almost unwillingly—as if she didn't want to respond to me.

Her tongue was silky smooth, and I wanted more of her. Everything about her was exquisite and playing with her tongue made me rock hard as I imagined what it would be like to have her tongue wrapped around my cock.

But it was too soon for that.

First, I had to coax my little virgin out of her shell and show her what pleasures could await her.

I pushed my lips against the base of her throat, enjoying her reluctant sigh of pleasure before sucking her nipples through her silky top. I felt a swell of satisfaction at how they puckered up under the wet fabric as I lavished attention on her breasts.

I slowly pushed down the straps of her top, trailing kisses from her neck down to her collarbone. And when she didn’t object, I pulled down her camisole all the way, revealing her naked breasts to my hungry eyes.

She was utterly gorgeous, and I couldn’t stop my mouth from feasting on her tits, kissing and licking them before latching onto one of her ripe nipples, feeling it lengthen immediately as my lips pulled at it, filling me with triumph as I knew I was affecting her. Even if her mind pretended it didn’t want me, her body couldn’t lie.

And at the same time, I teased her other nipple with my hand, stroking and pinching it, my cock throbbing at the sound of her breath quickening and her timid gasps of pleasure.

I could have sucked at her tits all night long, but there was something else I wanted to taste first.

I moved down her body and pushed my body between her legs, planting kisses on the inside of her soft thighs before roughly shoving her panties to one side, grasping her ass cheeks and latching my lips onto her sweet spot.

She stiffened and I could see that she was shocked at what I was doing to her with my mouth and there was also an element of fear burning behind her eyes.

I found her already soaked with arousal and her clit tasted divine as I sucked at her labia and swirled my tongue around it and sucked at the plump lips of her labia, making a deep sound of satisfaction at the taste of her.

“Alessio,” she gasped as she attempted to push my head away.

But I was relentless, forcing her thighs apart with my hands and holding them wide open while I gorged on the sight of her swollen pussy and lapped

at her slick juices. Her body had been tempting me since the first time I'd seen her and today I was going to have a piece of her.

I ran kisses up and down her inner thighs, savoring the delicate skin that brushed against my face. But I couldn't keep away from the taste of her pussy and soon returned to it, totally consumed by this woman.

Soon her hands stopped trying to push me away and instead she grabbed the bedsheets underneath her as her whole body writhed under my mouth. I glanced up and my eyes feasted on her tits, bouncing up and down as she took labored breaths.

I didn't stop eating her pussy until she was at the point of climax, and then I withdrew my lips and moved back up her body.

I grabbed her hair again and yanked her head to one side, burying my head into her neck before planting wet kisses on her breasts while rolling my thumb back and forth over her clit.

As her moans became more desperate, I moved my hands upwards, causing her to mewl in protest.

"You'll come when I let you," I growled as I ran my palms up and down her bare skin from her curved hips to the underside of her breasts.

My dick rubbed against her thighs, her body calling to me each time our skin connected, making me ache with ferocious need. I couldn't stop myself from rubbing the head of my cock against her clit, causing her to give a small cry and arch her back at the sensation. Fuck, I could come just like this by sliding my hard rod through her slippery folds.

After a while, I could resist her no longer. I looked at her dilated eyes and relished the view of her naked body in my bed and at my mercy. The fear in her eyes had transformed into desire and her response to me made me want to fuck her right there and then.

“Spread your legs,” I commanded in a voice hoarse with need.

Everything inside me felt so tight and heated, and I desperately needed her pussy. She was so fucking hot it was killing me.

She spread her legs again, her eyelids heavy as she watched me dip my tongue between her folds and move my lips along her tender slit. I wanted her so badly that not only did my balls ache, but also something more primal within me.

She was soaking wet, and I knew it wouldn’t take long for her to reach orgasm.

I wanted her to get as much pleasure from this as I did. I wanted her to love oral sex with me—and I was going to make her love it so much that soon she would be begging me to eat her pussy every day.

I concentrated on her clit, alternating between flicking it with my tongue and then sucking hard on it. At the same time, I reached up and pinched her nipples in the way she had liked earlier. Holding back from penetrating and pounding her sweet pussy was costing me every inch of my willpower.

“Fuck, playing with your tits and tasting your soaking pussy makes me want you so much.”

I could feel her thighs clamping more tightly around my face. This was the most intimate act I could do with her, and I felt triumphant that she was letting me do this and that I was bringing her to her peak.

“Alessio, please!”

“Please, what? Tell me what you want.”

But she obstinately refused to answer me, and I could see in her face that her mind was battling what her body wanted.

She whimpered keenly as I watched her reaction.

“Tell me,” I ordered her as she squirmed under me. Fuck, her pussy was soaked under my tongue and made delicious sounds as I slapped my tongue against it repeatedly.

She shook her head from side to side, determined to deny me what I wanted to hear. “Please, I need to come!”

“No! Not until you tell me what you want.”

She made a plaintive sound that went straight to my groin, but I didn’t allow her arousing sounds to deter me.

“Say it. Just fucking say it!” I gritted out as I increased the speed of my tongue on her clit while at the same time not giving enough pressure to allow her to come.

“I want you, Alessio,” she cried. “I want you!”

Hearing my name on her lips was an ignition to my flame, and the taste of her pussy and the sound of her pleading voice made me want her so much as I sucked hard on that little bud between her legs.

I could feel her muscles tensing and her breaths rasping until my tongue pushed her over the edge and she cried out in ecstasy with a succession of small screams.

She tried to push me away as her clit became over-sensitive, but I didn’t let her and instead I lapped at the area surrounding it, drawing out her climax for as long as possible.

As her orgasm eased, I savored the taste of her sweet nectar dripping on my tongue before working my way back up her body and holding her in my arms, stroking her hair and soothing her. Her body was soft, pliable, and easy to mold to me.

Finally, she had stopped fighting me.

I felt a savage elation as I looked down at her body, a body covered with a sheen of sweat I had induced, a body that had cried out with a passion I had ignited.

This is what I wanted from her. I wanted her to give me herself.

And now she had given me this much, next I would take her whole body for myself.

This was only the start. But after tonight, I knew that things were going to work out between us.

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CHAPTER 20

CATE

When I woke in the morning, I sat up in bed and saw that Alessio was already gone.

As the memories from last night came flooding back, I groaned and collapsed back against the pillows. I covered my red cheeks with my hands as if that could hide me from what had happened. How could I have been so stupid?

Looking across at Alessio's empty side of the bed, I was really glad he hadn't stayed for breakfast. Otherwise, it would have been too awkward, like what I imagined the morning after a one-night stand would be like. Not that I'd ever had a one-night stand—my father would have broken each and every finger of any man who tried to touch me before submitting him to the most painful death he could think of.

Alessio had been right when he'd said on our wedding night that I'd been attracted to him when I'd first met him. Worse than that, I was still attracted to him even after what he'd done to me in the garage. How sick was that?

Each time I thought about his muscled body, every time I thought about the time we'd spent together, made my heart beat just a little too fast. He was good at manipulating people, at manipulating me, and I hated him for it.

Tonight, I was going to break off this thing with Alessio. He was right last night when he had said I was curious about his body, but it had gone far enough as far as I was concerned.

I felt a wave of shame wash over me at how I had given in so easily to this man who had forced his way into my life—a man so cruel he had taken me to his torture room to force information out of me. He didn't care that I didn't want to tell him my secrets, didn't want to marry him, didn't want to give him my body: he was determined to take from me whatever he wanted and destroy me in the process.

I felt disgust at how I had given into him, at how I had orgasmed with his mouth upon me. He had humiliated me by showing me just how much power he held over me. I couldn't have hated him any more at this moment.

My emotions were all over the place. I didn't understand what was happening between us, but I knew I couldn't do this anymore. He was the same as all Made Men and nothing good would come out of this. I would be putting myself back into the Mafia world, back into the life that had already hurt me so badly and irrevocably.

I couldn't care for anyone else like that, I couldn't make myself vulnerable again—because it had nearly destroyed me when those who I

had loved the most had been so cruelly taken from me, and I wouldn't ever put myself back in that position.

Alessio's life was all about power, wealth, and violence, and I wanted none of those things for myself. Wealth and influence meant nothing to me. The only thing that mattered to me was the ones I loved and as I knew I couldn't have those people back, I would settle for the simple and safe life I had made for myself with my job, apartment and friends.

It was a life without excitement or exhilaration, but those were not things I desired. I just wanted to exist in my small, safe cocoon where no one could hurt me ever again. And I knew that Alessio could never be part of that life.

He may have forced me to marry him, and we may have been married legally, but even that could be changed. I was resolute that I wasn't getting in any deeper with him.

The one thing I knew was that I'd never trust a man from the Fratellanza again. I'd trusted and loved my father and I saw where that had gotten me, my mom, and my brother.

I was going to see a lawyer about getting the marriage annulled. Alessio could take it up with my father when they met up in hell.

As far as I was concerned, all Made Men were monsters, and they would all end up in the same place.

ALESSIO

I left Cate's apartment before she woke up this morning.

I would have liked to have been there when she woke, but I had a lot going on at work and needed to deal with some urgent matters. I wrote her a note, telling her that we were having a family dinner tonight back at the mansion and that I would meet her there at 6 p.m.

Later that day, I was back at the mansion around lunchtime, running through some business matters with Marco. As we were talking, I got a call on my cell phone from the perimeter guards.

“Who was that?” asked Marco, as he noted the expression on my face as I hung up the call.

“The perimeter guards. Nonna Tocchini has just arrived with her grandson. They’re making their way up to the house as we speak.” I sighed. “I thought this was all sorted out.”

Marco grimaced. “Obviously the Tocchinis still have some things to get off their chests.”

We stood at the bottom of the staircase as Marco called for our youngest brother. “Danio, get your skinny ass down here right this second,” he hollered up the stairs.

“You know,” I said drily, “you might get a better response from him if everything you said wasn’t yelled at him.”

“Whatever,” replied Marco, obviously not in the mood for taking parenting advice from me.

Marco, Danio, and I waited by the front door to greet our visitors. Nonna Tocchini bustled out of an SUV driven by her grandson, Antonio, scowling as soon as she saw us.

“Signora Tocchini,” greeted Marco. “This is an unexpected pleasure.” Although Marco was Capo, he showed the proper deference to an elder.

“Don’t you try to sweet-talk me, Capo. You know why I’m here,” she said, glaring daggers at Danio and scowling at us as her grandson helped her up our front steps.

Antonio was Carolinne’s brother and worked for us in the organization. He looked at us somewhat apologetically. “Sorry for the intrusion, Capo,” he said, as he fiddled with his car keys. “But my grandmother said she needed me to bring her to see you and that it couldn’t wait.” I could tell he felt uncomfortable being involved in what would no doubt be an awkward conversation regarding his sister and Danio.

“Please come in,” welcomed Marco, remarkably keeping his calm for once.

Antonio moved to come inside with his grandmother, but she shooed him off. “I don’t need you for this part—I can speak for myself. Go watch some porn on your phone or whatever takes up your precious time so you’re too busy to take your own Nonna out to visit the Capo.”

“Aw, Nonna—” Antonio started to protest, but she slapped him around the head.

“*Aw, Nonna*, nothing,” she snapped. “My grandson is *stupido* and needs to learn to respect his elders.” He was obviously on her bad side for not being available to bring her to see us any sooner.

Antonio skulked away to wait by his car, rubbing his head as he went.

We went into the living room and sat down on the couches—me, Marco and Danio on one, while Nonna Tocchini sat facing us on the opposite one.

“You know why I’m here. Carolinne is already promised to another family and her reputation is going to be ruined if you,” she said, pointing her finger at Danio, “keep on behaving like this.”

Marco sat forward. “Signora Tocchini, let me assure you that we have spoken with our younger brother and nothing like the other night will happen again.”

“Carolinne’s engagement will take place soon and we can’t have that jeopardized. You know how important the bond will be for my family, and you know how people talk.”

We sat and discussed the situation for the next twenty minutes, trying to reassure Carolinne’s grandmother that the other night was a mistake and that Danio would not be putting on a repeat performance.

The problem with Marco being a young Capo was that people like Nonna Tocchini had known him since he was a baby in diapers and thus bluntly spoke their minds to him when it came to family matters, although they were always careful not to comment on business. Marco always took care to be respectful to the elder members of our community, although I could tell he’d clearly had enough of talking about this subject.

As we were finishing up, Juliana came to tell us that lunch was ready. As was customary, Marco invited Nonna Tocchini to stay—food was everything in Italian families and it would be an insult not to invite someone to stay for a meal.

As it was a weekend, everyone was home for lunch. We sat around the dining table and Nonna even forgave Antonio enough to let him come in and eat with us too, although I diplomatically steered Danio to sit on the opposite end of the table from the two Tocchinis.

Juliana came in with food she had cooked: freshly made cannelloni stuffed with minced beef and spinach, covered with a tomato and basil sauce, and a mozzarella topping. After everyone had helped themselves to the food, we started to eat.

“Mamma mia!” exclaimed Nonna, spluttering and reaching for a glass of water. “What is this rubbish?”

“Beef cannelloni,” replied Juliana with a smile. “It’s the first time I’ve tried this recipe and it seems to have turned out pretty well.”

Nonna looked at Marco, shaking her head. “Capo, your wife cannot cook cannelloni. If this gets out, we’ll be the laughingstock of the Mafia world. You need to get her some lessons.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Signora Tocchini,” interjected Juliana. “I’ve had lessons already, and this is much better than what I used to cook.”

Nonna harrumphed and fixed her gaze on Marco and me. “No wonder your boy is sniffing around my Carolinne like a dog in heat. *She* knows how to cook cannelloni.”

Danio flushed bright red, Antonio rolled his eyes, and Marco just looked bewildered—clearly not knowing how to deal with the formidable Nonna Tocchini.

CATE

I arrived at the Marchiano mansion at 5.30 p.m., determined to say my piece to Alessio and then leave before dinner started.

I found, however, the living area full of even more Marchianos than normal.

“Cate,” Alessio called to me over to the dining area. I walked over slowly, avoiding Alessio’s gaze, my cheeks warming as images of last night played in my mind. “This is my cousin, Lorenzo,” he introduced. “You may remember him from our wedding.”

I didn’t recall his face. He looked like every other brooding Made Man: dressed in black and with a serious look on his face.

“He’s our Underboss here in Chicago.”

“Hi,” I said warily. I looked around, wondering if I could get Alessio to himself. The guys, however, were in the middle of talking business, so it looked like I would have to wait until after dinner to get Alessio by himself.

I resigned myself to this and wandered over to the sofas where Debi was talking with a young woman and two small children. I couldn’t help noticing that Mr. Fluffy was lurking nearby.

“Where’s Juliana?” I asked, not seeing her anywhere and wondering who was going to keep her dog under control.

“She has a doctor’s appointment in the city and said she wouldn’t be back until around 6 p.m.,” said Debi. “Cate, this is Anni. She’s Lorenzo’s wife.”

“Hi,” said Anni with a friendly smile. She had her short blonde hair in a sleek bob and was wearing jeans with a bright top that looked like a vintage kimono. “I was at your wedding, although you probably don’t remember me.”

I gave a rueful smile. “It was all a bit of a blur, I’m afraid.”

“I remember feeling exactly the same about my own wedding. I think everyone else had more fun than me. To be honest, it was all a bit of a shock to my system.”

“I felt just like that—and still do.” Anni seemed lovely, and it was nice to not have to pretend in front of her. It sounded as though her marriage hadn’t been the easiest either. I looked down at the two children who were sitting on the floor and playing.

“Clara, Clemente, this is Cate,” said Anni.

The little girl flicked her eyes toward me but said nothing and carried on playing—she was obviously shy. The little boy looked up and gave me a chuckle.

“How old are they?” I asked.

“They’re four and two.” Anni looked down fondly at both children. “They’re from Lorenzo’s first marriage, but I treat them as if they were my own. They’re great kids.”

Clara had brought a big bag of dressing up clothes with her…as well as a white cat with big blue eyes. I knew that kids often carried a stuffed toy around with them, but I was surprised to see that this little girl had brought a real cat with her.

We watched as Clara put pink rabbit ears on her head and a pompom bunny tail over her shorts. Then she got more bunny ears and another pompom tail out of her bag and called the cat over. “Wilbur,” she cooed, in a gentle voice.

The cat immediately diverted his attention to the little girl. His eyes looked at the ears and tail in disdain as if he knew what Clara was planning. But as she called his name again, he obediently scampered over to her and rubbed his head against her legs.

Clara then proceeded to put the ears on his head and attach the tail around his tummy. “This is dolly’s rabbit outfit,” she said seriously to him. “But you can wear it today.” Wilbur let Clara dress him and purred as she rubbed between his ears.

“He’s very devoted to her, isn’t he?” I observed.

“He utterly adores Clara,” Anni replied. “He’s never let me dress him up, but he’ll do anything for her. She often insists on bringing him wherever we go, much to Lorenzo’s irritation.”

Satisfied with how the cat looked, Clara directed her focus to Mr. Fluffy. “Mr. Fluffy, do you want to dress up too?” She obviously didn’t want him to feel left out.

The dog didn’t need to be asked twice, bounding over as soon as he was called. I took a slight step back, glad that Debi and Anni stood between the dog and me.

Clara got out sparkly pink bunny ears and put them on Mr. Fluffy's head and then added a pompom tail to him. “You look very handsome now,” she told him earnestly.

Mr. Fluffy was enjoying the attention from her. Suddenly he put his paws in Clara’s lap and swiped his wet tongue across her cheek.

Clara looked taken aback, and I saw Lorenzo swiftly stride toward us, his face thunderous.

Before he could reach us, however, Mr. Fluffy gave Clara another lick, causing a giggle to bubble up the little girl’s throat.

At the sound of his daughter’s laughter, Lorenzo paused, and his face softened.

“It’s okay, Lorenzo,” reassured Anni. “I’m keeping an eye on them all.”

“Mr. Fluffy’s harmless,” added Debi, although Lorenzo scowled at the mention of the dog. I got the feeling that he didn’t consider anyone ‘harmless’ when it came to his little girl.

“Mom,” said the little girl to Anni, “the doggy is so soft.”

Anni gave her a smile. “That’s because he’s got lots of fur.”

“I like stroking fur,” she whispered, as she ran her hands over his coat.

I didn’t envy Anni being married to Lorenzo—he was pretty intense, plus she had become an instant stepmother to two young children upon her marriage. She only looked to be in her early twenties, while Lorenzo

appeared to be a good few years older. It was a Mafia past-time to wonder about the dynamics within another's marriage; although I realized that, now, my marriage would be subject to the same sort of speculation amongst the wives of the Fratellanza.

Clara continued playing with the cat and Mr. Fluffy, preferring their company to anyone else's, despite Debi's best attempts to engage the little girl in play.

I continued talking with Anni while the children played. "It's amazing that the children accept you so readily as their mom," I remarked.

"It took a while for us all to adjust, but the kids were the sweetest things right from the start. We have lots of photos of their mother around the house and talk about her and visit her grave. I tell them that she is still watching over them. And Lorenzo tells them that their mother would want me looking after them because she's with God and no longer able to do it herself."

There was no opportunity to get Alessio by himself, so I was forced to stay for dinner.

The men continued talking business, which meant that, thankfully, Alessio didn't focus too much attention on me. It was hard to look at him after what I had let him do to me last night. Instead, I listened while Debi and Anni talked, although I found it hard to concentrate on their conversation, knowing what I had to say to Alessio later.

Anni sat between the two children and helped them both with their food.

After Clara had eaten enough, she climbed down from her chair and perched her chubby hands on Lorenzo's arm. "Dadda," she cooed.

Lorenzo stopped talking immediately and looked down at his daughter with a look of complete love. I had also seen him give the same look to

Anni earlier—but I knew that wasn't ever something I could have with Alessio.

“Yes, mia preziosa,” said Lorenzo, his eyes filling with love as he called his daughter ‘my precious’.

She stretched her arms up at him.

Knowing what his daughter wanted, he scooped her up into his lap. She looked so tiny in his arms. He carried on talking to Marco, although the men were very careful in what they said explicitly in front of the children.

Clara curled up in her father’s lap and put her head against his chest. She was content to listen to the rhythm of his voice and feel his arms around her as she snuggled into him with her thumb in her mouth.

“You’re tired, mia preziosa,” Lorenzo said softly as he stroked her dark curls back from her forehead. “We’ll get you home to bed soon.”

At the end of the meal, I tried to catch Alessio by himself. “Um, Alessio, can I have a word please?”

"I have to head out with Lorenzo to deal with something. I’ll see you back at the apartment later tonight.”

Barely concealing my sigh of frustration, I returned to my apartment, where I spent the evening flicking through TV channels and pacing back and forth. I was nervous about what I had to say to Alessio, but I was determined to say my piece.

When Alessio hadn’t arrived by 11 p.m., I decided to go to sleep. I would wake up and talk to him when he arrived. I was too tired to stay up any longer, so I climbed into bed and let my tiredness overtake me.

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The next thing I knew, I was being shaken awake. Alessio was here. “Wake up, Cate. You need to get up.”

I looked at the clock and it was 1.30 a.m. “Alessio? What’s the matter?”

“We need to go.” He was speaking in an urgent tone. “Get up.”

I stumbled out of bed, and he grabbed a throw and wrapped it around my shoulders. “What do you mean? Go where? I told you I don’t want to live in your mansion.”

“I’m not talking about the mansion. We need to leave Chicago and go to a place where the FBI can’t get to us.” He pulled at my hand, urging me to get moving. “They want to arrest me, Marco, and Camillo. We need to lie low for a while. They also might arrest you, so we need to get you somewhere safe as well.”

“What?” I halted in the middle of the bedroom. “Arrest me for what? I haven’t done anything.” I could hear the panic in my voice.

“The FBI and DEA are looking into the bad drugs that your father distributed to us and the Russians.”

“I thought you had police connections?”

“Yes, we do, but they’re not good enough when bad drugs are out there and responsible for numerous deaths. Damn your father!”

“Why do they want to arrest me?” My heart was beating frantically.

“They know we’re married now. I think they may believe you’re also involved in the drug supply transactions somehow.”

He took my hand again and tugged me along with him, but I shook myself free of his hold. “What?” Shock and incomprehension combined to smother a fog over my thought processes. “But that’s ridiculous! Of course

it’s not true. I just need to answer the FBI’s questions and once they hear the truth, I’ll be in the clear. Honesty is the best policy.”

“I’m not leaving you here, cara.”

My chest felt tight like I was suffocating, but I knew what I had to do. “Look…I was going to tell you tonight anyway that this thing between us can’t go on. We need to get the marriage annulled. I don’t want it. And I don’t want you.”

I stilled as Alessio’s eyes glittered in the darkness, glinting as cold as steel. “Oh, and what do you think *this thing* is?” His voice was dangerously quiet.

“I-I don’t know exactly. But maybe you see me as…as a plaything, someone to amuse yourself with until you get bored of your twisted revenge game and move on.” I wished my voice had come out stronger and that I sounded more confident when I spoke to him.

“If I thought you were a *plaything*, I wouldn’t have given you time to get used to me.”

The hunger in his eyes made me shudder.

“I wouldn’t have taken it slow with you. I’ve wanted you since the day I rescued you from the Bratva, but I’ve held off until you were ready.”

“Held off?” He made my hackles rise. “What, by forcing me to marry you? By forcing your way into my apartment and into my bed?”

“You didn’t seem unhappy last night when I was licking between your thighs and making you scream.” He gave a hard laugh. “Damn, I can see how my words are turning you on right now. Stop pretending you don’t feel this connection between us too.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I had to stand my ground. “I’m not leaving my life, my job, or my grandmother.”

He took hold of my arms. “No,” I shouted, but he began to march me toward the door.

I tore myself out of his hold and looked around myself wildly. I was standing near the kitchen counter and grabbed a knife.

“What are you doing, Cate? Put the knife down.”

My breaths were coming in short pants. I looked down and saw that my hands were shaking, making the blade of the knife glimmer under the lights.

I knew Alessio thought I wouldn’t have the courage to use the knife.

He took a step toward me slowly. “Easy, Cate, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Aren’t you? Isn’t that what you want?” As I spoke, I heard the frantic tones in my voice.

“That’s not what I want with you.”

I felt like I was falling apart. The FBI wanted to arrest me and Alessio wasn’t listening to me.

I was fighting to think clearly. And when Alessio reached toward my hand to take the knife, I surprised myself by lashing out.

He was too quick for me, and I missed. I lashed out again.

He grabbed me by the wrist and wrenched the knife from my hold. He yanked me toward him and twisted me around, making me cry out as he slammed my back into his hard male body, causing the air to whoosh out of my lungs.

I tried to wrestle free, bucking against him, but he was too strong for me, restraining me easily with one arm.

“Stop fighting me!” He showed me the syringe he held in his free hand.

“We can do this the easy way, or the hard way, Cate. It’s up to you.”

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CHAPTER 21

ALESSIO

She gulped, her mind frantically trying to work a way out of this.

“You’re mine now and that’s never going to change,” I growled. “Do I need to drug you, or will you come with me now?”

I had come prepared with a sedative, but inside me had been the hope that I wouldn’t have to use it. There was no way I was leaving her behind and there was no way anyone was going to take her from me.

She hesitated, but registering the fierceness in my expression, her body slumped slightly, and she gave the smallest nod.

I didn’t let go of her as I marched her out of her apartment to the waiting SUV. Despite her agreement to cooperate, I had to force her toward the vehicle, strengthening my hold around her arms and pushing her forward.

Her petite body was easy to manipulate; however, I had to force myself to loosen my hold as I saw her wince in pain at my hard grip on her arm.

She was wearing pajama bottoms and a vest top. I pulled her closer to my body—I needed to keep her warm in the chilly night air. Despite the imminent danger we were in, my mind wouldn't stop thinking about what I could do to make things easier for her.

One of my soldiers was driving us to the airfield. When we arrived, I swiftly walked her toward the plane, although she was dragging her heels and looking around for anyone who might help her.

But no one would help her here—we paid them too much money for anyone to cross us. We used this airfield because they were happy to accept our large amounts of cash and keep their mouths shut.

Marco, Juliana, and Camillo were already on the plane. The FBI also wanted to arrest Marco and Camillo, and there was no way that Marco would leave Juliana behind. Thankfully, Danio and Debi would be looked after by one of our cousins, with security provided by a dozen of our best soldiers.

Leaving our younger siblings behind felt like a knife twisting inside me, but we would be of no use to them if we stayed and allowed ourselves to get arrested. We would sort this mess out and then return home as soon as possible.

We boarded the private jet, and I led Cate to where we would be sitting and strapped her into her seat as she looked up at me with huge, scared eyes.

"I've changed my mind. I want to go home." She unfastened the seatbelt and suddenly stood, trying to get past me. But her legs were wobbly with panic, and I caught her as she stumbled.

“It’s okay, you just need to sit down and rest, cara,” I said as I pushed her firmly back into her seat and reached across her to fasten her seatbelt again. I wasn’t going to let her get away from me.

“No, I want to go home,” she said more forcefully.

“That’s not possible right now. I’m not leaving you unprotected, and I’m not leaving you behind,” I said with steel in my voice. “Nobody, not even the FBI, is going to take you away from me.”

I saw a tear escape and slide down her pale cheeks. As she tried to wipe it away quickly, I felt guilt seeping into me. I knew she thought my heart was made of ice, but her tears touched it in a way that hadn’t happened to me before.

I spoke more softly. “Look, it’s late and you’re tired and scared. Try to sleep and things will seem better once we’re in a safer place and you’re rested.”

She rubbed her fingertips against her temples. She must have a headache, I thought. “Here, drink some water, it will help with your headache.”

But she was stubborn and refused to take the water and instead turned her body away from me toward the window. She refused to look at me during take-off and ignored anything I said to her.

I pushed the guilt from my mind and let anger take its place. Anger at the whole situation with the FBI and anger at Cate for not wanting to be with me.

It was clear from what she had said earlier in her apartment that she didn’t feel the same way about me as I felt about her, and she had no intention of honoring our arranged marriage.

I had tried to make things easier for her—by letting her live at her apartment and carry on working, but she still kept fighting me every step of

the way. If we hadn't been on a plane on our way out of the United States, I knew she probably would have tried to see a lawyer tomorrow about annulling our marriage.

A while after take-off, Cate said she needed to use the restroom, and I watched her while she walked across the jet. On the way back to her seat, she met me in the aisle. "Can I call Nonna and let her know that I'm alright? She can't hear about this from someone else—you know she's been unwell and how stressed she's been since my father's death."

"No." My anger at her made my response curt.

"Why? Am I your prisoner?" She hurled her words at me. "I thought you wanted to take me away to keep me free, but I think instead you just want to be my jailer."

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"No, you're not. You're trying to control my life. I hate you!"

My fury bubbled dangerously close to the surface. I grabbed her arm and pushed her toward her seat. "Sit down and drink the water," I growled. "You're tired and dehydrated."

She winced at my tight grip, and although I thought she was going to refuse, she took heed of the warning note in my voice. Sitting down, she took the water from my outstretched hand.

I watched her intently as she sipped at it slowly.

After she finished the water, I took the empty bottle from her hands.

"You should try to rest. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Italy."

"Why so far away?" she asked in disbelief.

“The FBI can’t touch us there because our connections are too strong. We’ll lie low there until we have sorted out this whole situation.”

I watched as she settled down to sleep. She tried to discreetly wipe away some more tears.

I didn’t try to comfort her—I knew there was nothing I could say at this moment to make her hate me any less.

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CHAPTER 22

ALESSIO

I just watched Cate until she eventually fell asleep.

Her telling me that she wanted the marriage annulled was like a stab to my heart. I tried to temper my rage and told myself that she was in shock after learning the FBI might arrest her.

But deep down, I knew she was rejecting me and denying our relationship.

And she was doing this even though last night she had responded to me and shown me that my feelings for her weren't just one-sided.

Usually, I kept myself in complete control of my emotions, but somehow this woman had gotten under my skin. Emotions were a liability for a Made Man. In our world, the fewer people we were close to, the simpler things were for us.

But I needed Cate like a man needs oxygen, and I knew that I couldn't be without her now. I just had to convince her that she felt the same—and until then, I needed to control my fury.

My body coiled tighter as I looked across at her sleeping form. I wanted to drag her into the plane's bedroom right now and finally drive my cock relentlessly into her tight virgin pussy. I needed to fuck her into submission, leaving her in no doubt that she belonged to me—and that there was no escape.

***

A while later, I went over to where Marco, Camillo, and Juliana were sitting.

Juliana was opening a Tupperware container. "Marco, I brought your dinner with me, seeing how you were too busy to eat earlier." She pulled out silver cutlery, and using a fork, she picked up a mouthful of the food and brought it toward Marco's mouth.

Marco eyed the fork warily. "Did you burn it?"

"Of course," she grinned. "Now open up."

Marco, to his credit, managed to keep a grimace from his face as he swallowed the forkful.

Why the hell she brought the food with her was beyond me. I mean, we had a chef on board who could cook anything we wanted.

A muffled sound came from the seat behind Juliana.

I knew that sound anywhere.

It was a snore.

More specifically, it was a *dog* snore.

Juliana had brought her damn dog along with her.

I took a few steps forward and caught sight of the dog who was sprawled across two seats. “What the hell is the dog doing here?”

“I didn’t want to leave Mr. Fluffy behind,” Juliana responded.

“We’re going to Italy to get away from the FBI. Last time I looked, your dog wasn’t on the FBI’s *Most Wanted List*,” I said tersely.

Marco interrupted me. “It’s a stressful time for Juliana, what with feeling rough with the pregnancy, all that upset over her sister’s wedding, and now this shitshow with the FBI. If Mr. F keeps her happy, then I’m happy too.”

“Well, I’m not happy,” I snapped.

“Look, I tried to get Lorenzo to take the dog, but he absolutely refused,” said Marco. “He says he hates animals.” Lorenzo was going to look after Debi and Danio until we could sort out this whole situation and return home.

“And then I cried,” added Juliana, a wicked grin on her face. “A pregnant woman is an emotional woman.”

She’d resorted to emotional blackmail.

Mr. F woke up at that moment, and after a lazy stretch, he got down from the seats and ambled over to us.

“Hello, handsome,” Juliana cooed, ruffling the fur between his ears. “Did you have a nice nap?” Juliana didn’t look stressed in the slightest to me.

She began fussing over her animal who for some unknown reason was wearing Juliana’s pink sunglasses and had a donut swim ring around his neck.

“Why the hell is the dog dressed like that?”

“He's getting in the mood.” She put on a silly voice and pretended to be the dog. “*Daddy Marco, I've been such a good doggy lately that I deserve a vacation, don't I?”*

“I am not his dad for fuck's sake,” Marco replied to his wife. “If you really want to see my daddy side in action, then I'll happily take you to the bedroom at the back of the jet.”

“I love it when you get all caveman,” Juliana sighed.

Marco glanced over Juliana’s shoulder as she tapped on her cell phone. “Who are you messaging?”

“Don’t worry—I’ve got the block turned on so that no one can trace my location via my social media posts. I’m just updating Mr. Fluffy’s Instagram page to let his friends know what he’s up to today.”

“What friends?” Marco grabbed Juliana’s cell. “Who the hell are Biggo, Blacky, Browny, Templeton, Coley, Mathilda, and all these other people listed under the ‘friends’ tab?”

“They’re Mr. F’s friends—you know, other pets he follows on Instagram and who follow him. I’m just posting to let them know that he’s off on vacation and that we’ll post some more once we get there.”

“Mr. F has his own Instagram account?” I exclaimed as I snatched the phone from Marco. “Let me see that. Christ, he’s got over 200,000 followers?” My jaw dropped.

“I’m cultivating his social media presence,” she said airily. “It will help keep him in dog food if you guys ever get arrested and the Feds freeze our assets.”

“Wow, Juliana, you really think ahead, don’t you?” I gritted out. I wasn’t sure I liked anyone talking about the possibility of any of us getting arrested.

“There’s no point burying your head in the sand about these sorts of things,” she replied.

I shook my head at her. Juliana knew that I didn’t really mind Mr. F, but my main concern was Cate being wary around dogs. She was already unhappy about going to Italy. She will be doubly so about staying in the villa with a dog.

“Just keep the dog off my bedsheets and try to keep the dog away from Cate. She really doesn’t like dogs and is a bit scared around them.”

Juliana spoke to her dog. “Did you hear that, Mr. Fluffy? No flirting with Alessio’s new wife.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, but that didn’t stop her from saying more.

“Anyway, what does Cate think about you dragging her to Italy? You didn’t bother to consult with her about the engagement, so I’m assuming you didn’t give her a choice over this trip either.” Disapproval dripped from her words as her tone turned serious.

“Cate will do as I tell her to,” I snapped, before returning to my seat.

***

Cate had a fitful sleep on the plane.

Later, when she was fully awake, I looked across at her. “How are you feeling now?”

Her eyes reluctantly met mine, full of hostility. Ignoring my question, the first thing she said was, “Can I call my grandmother? She’ll be worried

when she doesn’t hear from me. You know I call her every morning while I have my breakfast.”

“No. The FBI will be able to trace the call and it’s better they don’t know where we are for now.”

“She’ll worry herself sick. She’s already grieving over my father, and you know she hasn’t been well.”

I sighed. “You can call her once we’re in Italy and have set up a secure line that can’t be traced. I’ll get Danio working on it straight away—he’s an IT whizz. He’ll route it so that the FBI won’t know which country we’re in. It may take a couple of days to set up.”

After that, Cate went back to ignoring me, and it was clear she didn’t want to talk to me.

After everything that had happened, I knew that I would have to let her get used to me slowly.

She was still really jumpy, and I didn’t want to force myself on her after what she had been through with the Bratva.

CATE

It was morning when we finally arrived in Italy, and I was exhausted after my broken sleep.

Alessio helped me out of my seat and off the plane, and we got into the waiting SUVs which would drive us to where we would be staying. I was still furious with him and that wasn’t going to change any time soon.

I looked out of the car window with interest, taking in my first views of Italy.

I'd never been abroad before. My father had always been too busy with work, and he wasn't one for long vacations. Most vacations we had taken were at our lake house, although we did go to Florida a couple of times.

We had landed in Naples—I had overheard Camillo mention this. Although I had never been to Italy, my knowledge of its geography was good. When I was growing up, my father had a large map of Italy on the wall in his office. I had spent hours looking at it over the years, thinking about which places I wanted to visit one day.

Little did I know back then that this was how my first trip to Italy would go—forcibly brought here against my will.

I was mesmerized by the view of the wide blue sea in the distance, and I knew that I must be looking at the Bay of Naples. My awe increased when I saw what could only be Mount Vesuvius, the volcano which had famously destroyed the Roman city of Pompeii. I tried not to feel like a tourist, but it was hard not to be excited by my first glimpses of these places which I had longed to visit.

We appeared to be heading closer to the coast. I thought about what I knew about the surrounding area, recalling that there were some islands very close to Naples: Capri and Ischia. Capri was a playground for the rich, while Ischia was a volcanic island famed for its thermal springs.

I prayed fervently that we weren't going to one of the islands. My mind kept reminding me that escape from an island would be much more difficult than if we were on the mainland—on an island, the only way to escape would be via boat or plane.

As we drove, I saw signs for Sorrento, Amalfi, Ravello, and Positano, which meant that we were heading south of Naples. That, however, was as much as I could guess.

Over an hour later, we finally pulled up at the Marchiano villa. It was situated right on the coast, but thankfully, we were still on the mainland. My anxiety heightened again, however, when I realized that I could see no other properties nearby.

The smooth stucco of the villa was painted white. The house had terracotta roof tiles, while a black wrought-iron balcony wrapped around the house. There were lush plantings of hibiscus and bougainvillea everywhere, with the tumbling fuchsia flowers standing out against the white walls of the villa. But the most stunning thing was the gorgeous view of the Mediterranean Sea.

After we entered the villa, Alessio turned to me. “I’ll show you to my bedroom. We’ll use my usual room here.”

I trudged up the staircase and followed Alessio into a bedroom that was flooded with sunlight. It had pale walls and a tiled floor, which felt cool against my bare feet.

There were doors leading to a balcony that had black, wrought-iron railings and stylish planters containing bright, exotic flowers. The balcony had a jaw-dropping view of the cerulean sea, as well as a view over the pool and garden. The room itself contained an ornate bed made up with white bedlinens and cushions. This place would make a perfect vacation spot—that is if we weren’t actually on the run from the FBI.

I felt gritty, and I needed to brush my teeth. “I need to take a shower and I need clean clothes. I’ve got no clothes here—what am I supposed to do?” I huffed.

“I always leave some clothes here. Here, take one of my t-shirts. That will do until I sort something out for you. While you shower, I’ll go down and make us some breakfast.”

The bathroom was a dream in marble. I let the hot water soothe my exhausted body and could have fallen asleep on my feet. After a long while, I turned the water off, wrapped a soft white towel around myself, and headed back into the bedroom. The white drapes fluttered around the open balcony door, and I could see Alessio sitting on the balcony with a tray of food and coffee on top of the outdoor table.

“You should eat something, cara. You didn’t eat anything at all during the flight,” he said, indicating toward the food.

“No, I’m too tired to eat,” I said. I went and stood in front of the dresser and brushed out my wet hair.

He took the hairbrush out of my hands and pushed down on my shoulders to make me sit on the chair. I wondered what he was doing, but I was too tired to argue.

He started to brush my hair for me. The strokes were rhythmic and relaxing, and I gave in to the soothing sensation. When he had finished, he put the brush down on top of the dresser. “You’re dead on your feet, cara. Here, have something to eat before you take a rest.”

“No, I don’t want anything.” I walked over to the bed and tumbled between the covers. It felt so welcoming to my tired body. The pillows were the softest feathers, and the sheets were the smoothest cotton. I felt myself falling asleep straight away.

As I drifted off, I sensed Alessio caressing my hair. And I fell asleep thinking that his touch felt good.

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CHAPTER 23

CATE

I slept through lunch and woke mid-afternoon.

As I laid in bed, trying to wake up through my grogginess, I could hear voices coming through the open doors. I got up and went over to the balcony, looking down to see Alessio, Marco, Juliana, and Camillo sitting by the pool.

I went back and sat on the bed, wondering how on earth I'd ended up here with this man.

A short time later, Alessio came upstairs with a sandwich. "I saw you were awake, so I thought I'd bring you up some lunch."

"Oh, let me guess, you've got a camera in here spying on me?"

"No, I saw you out on the balcony," he said mildly, not rising to my sarcastic tone.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You have to eat.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Cate.” There was a warning note in his voice.

I sighed. “Maybe later, okay? I’m not hungry right now. I feel all groggy.”

“You’d feel better if you got up and came and sat outside for a bit,” he suggested, eyeing me intently.

“Please can you just leave me alone?”

“Fine.” He looked angry but I didn’t care.

I spent the rest of the day in the bedroom, and later Alessio brought dinner up when I didn’t join the others downstairs. I picked at it and managed only a few mouthfuls. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep.

That night, I woke briefly when Alessio got into bed with me, but I just turned over and went back to sleep. I had no energy to talk to him right now anyway, and there was nothing left to say.

***

When I woke the next morning, I found Alessio was already up and dressed in blue jeans and a gray fitted t-shirt. “I’m going down to make breakfast for us now, cara.”

I didn’t respond.

“I know you’re awake, Cate.”

“Can I ring my grandmother this morning?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I’ll stay here for a bit.” I decided there was no point in getting up.

The next moment I was shrieking as he pulled the covers off me and I felt the cold air conditioning blast my skin.

“Get up and come down for breakfast.”

“I’ve got no clothes to wear,” I complained.

“I got you some yesterday. Juliana went clothes shopping, and I went with her.”

“I’m still not coming down. I don’t like the dog.”

“The dog’s not up yet. Anyway, don’t worry, I’ll protect you from him,” he said with a grin, further irking me. He wasn’t going to leave me alone.

I rolled my eyes at him as I got up and headed to the shower.

“Come down when you’re dressed,” he called out as he headed out of the bedroom.

After I had showered, I dressed in one of the new sundresses Alessio had purchased for me and then made my way downstairs.

Alessio took my hand and sat me in the garden by the pool. Marco, Juliana, and Camillo were not up yet, so we had the place to ourselves. Alessio had prepared a breakfast of muesli, cereal, toast, fruit, coffee, and juice. He had even picked some flowers from the garden, putting them in a vase and setting it on the table between us.

“Sit,” he ordered me.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I snapped at him, my emotions all over the place. He was trying to pretend that this was just a normal breakfast between a husband and wife, but we both knew it was a charade. I’d only married him because I’d had no choice—because he was determined to punish my family and me.

“You know why. I’m not going to let the FBI get their hands on you. You’re mine now.”

His words caused a shiver to travel through me. He didn’t just see me as his wife; he saw me as his possession.

He paused before continuing. “I know you hate me.”

“Am I that easy to read?” I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“But I don’t hate you.”

My breath caught in my throat as his protective gaze upon me, and the obsession tinging his words made my skin flush.

“I still remember that day when we walked in the gardens and how soft your lips felt. And I remember the night in your apartment and how your body responded to me.” His voice was low.

“Stop it,” I blurted out. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Don’t you?” he asked quietly.

“No,” I replied forcefully.

He looked at me thoughtfully before changing the subject.

He tried to engage me in general conversation throughout our meal, but I made monosyllabic responses to anything he said and went straight back upstairs after breakfast.

“I need to lie down. I didn’t sleep well last night. I’m still jetlagged and my body is all out of kilter.” I grabbed some books from the villa’s library and took them with me to the bedroom.

At lunchtime, Alessio made me come down to eat with the rest of the family. The atmosphere was awkward due to the tension between Alessio and me, despite Juliana trying to keep the conversation going.

After lunch, I made for the stairs. “I’m going upstairs for a nap. I feel sleepy.”

“No, you won’t sleep tonight if you sleep this afternoon—you won’t get over your jetlag and adjust to the new time zone.” Alessio took my arm and dragged me over to a sun-lounger.

During the afternoon, he tried to get me to swim with him and the others, but I refused. Instead, I read one of the books I had picked out earlier from the spacious library located next to the formal dining room.

Even though he had made me come here to Italy with him, he couldn’t force me to be his willing wife, I thought to myself. I wasn’t his toy to do with as he pleased, to drag wherever he wanted me to go.

That evening at dinner, it was just the two of us. The others tactfully went out for dinner, giving Alessio and me some alone time. I would much rather have been anywhere than here alone with him.

He cooked one of my favorite dishes, seafood linguine, but I barely spoke to him during the meal.

***

That night I couldn’t sleep because of my jetlag. My body clock was all messed up.

I got out of bed and stepped out onto the balcony, looking out at the garden. The night was still warm, and the pool looked inviting. The water had looked enticing earlier, but I hadn’t wanted to give Alessio the satisfaction of seeing me enjoy the pool.

I decided to take a swim. I crept back into the bedroom and into the walk-in closet. There, Alessio had already unpacked all the new clothes he

had purchased for me when he had gone shopping with Juliana. He had cut the tags off the clothes and precisely folded everything into neat piles, even sorted them in color-coded order.

I didn’t care what I wore, and I just grabbed the first swimsuit that I found. It was a red two-piece. It would do—I just needed something to swim in. I quietly undressed and slipped on the swimsuit. It was a perfect fit. At least he got that right.

I quietly crept out of the bedroom, my bare feet making no sound against the cool tiles of the floor. I made my way down the staircase and out toward the pool. The water looked serene in the still night, and I felt drawn to it after the earlier heat of the day.

Although the night was warm, there was a slight coolness in the air. I slowly lowered my body into the water, gasping for a moment as the cold water enveloped my body.

Once my body got used to the temperature of the water, I decided to swim a few laps. The water was refreshing, and I felt the tension in my shoulders ebb away. It felt good to stretch out my muscles after yesterday’s long flight here and the lazy day I had spent sleeping in bed.

The pool was surrounded by olive trees, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and lemon groves, giving a lush feel to the garden. I thought to myself that it must be beautiful to swim here during the day and see all the vibrant flowers in the sunshine.

ALESSIO

I woke up when I heard the sound of movement around me in the bedroom. The door softly clicked shut.

I grabbed my gun, which was on my nightstand, but then I realized that someone had just left the room, not come into it. Cate wasn't beside me anymore, and I knew she must have gone downstairs—probably to get a glass of water or a snack.

I got up, thinking that I would go check and make sure she was okay. She was still angry at me, but that didn't mean that I wouldn't keep her as safe as I humanly could.

There was a need deep within me to keep her protected, and that included knowing where she was at every moment, day or night—and knowing that she wasn't attempting to escape me.

As I walked past the closet, I noticed her clothes on the floor. I sighed at the mess. I will deal with it later.

I went downstairs, but she wasn't in the kitchen. I noticed that the doors to the garden were open. I walked outside and heard the sound of someone swimming in the pool. My eyes caught sight of a flash of red and burnt orange, and I saw Cate's graceful body gliding through the water.

My eyes were drawn to her hair, which the water had darkened to a stunning shade of auburn, and to her body which was clothed in the red halter-neck bikini I had picked out for her when I had gone shopping with Juliana. I stood for a few moments, just watching her body as she moved through the water.

I was wearing only my black boxer briefs—I hadn't gotten dressed before coming downstairs. I quietly slipped them off and dove into the water. The noise of my body breaking the surface of the water made her jerk around in surprise.

But then she saw that it was only me. We just looked at each other across the pool.

I slowly swam over to her, not taking my eyes off her for a second. She didn't move as I came toward her, and I only stopped when I reached her.

"I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd come for a swim," she said, biting her lower lip.

"So I see."

She seemed nervous as she looked over my body. But there was something else in her eyes as well—something that set a match to my inner fire.

I couldn't help myself. I grabbed her and crashed my hard mouth to her soft, plump lips. I let out my frustrations of the last forty-eight hours into that kiss and my lips were firm and demanding.

She felt tense and rigid in my arms. I had taken her by surprise.

I relaxed my tight grip on her arms and softened my lips against hers.

Instead of demanding from her, I teased her mouth until I felt her lips part. And then I used my tongue to gently stroke hers until she relaxed even more, feeling her soften in my hold and the tension leave her body.

A fire burned through me, making me want to mold her to me and make her mine. I ran kisses down her throat and along the top of her full breasts.

We were in the shallower end of the pool. The top half of her body was out of the water, but wet droplets still clung to her skin while goosebumps rose up on her arms. And I could clearly see that her nipples were large, hard bullets under her red bikini top. Christ, she looked so sexy.

I ran kisses down the illicit cleft between her breasts and I could tell she wasn't immune to me when I heard her sigh. Moving back up to her face

and lips, her eyes tightly closed, I plunged my tongue back into her mouth and felt her meet me with her own.

She was now just as willing as I was.

My arms were clasping her tightly to me. And while her eyes were closed, I moved my hands to the nape of her neck and pulled the bow holding up her halter-neck bikini top.

As soon as the bow was undone, the weight of her breasts made the fabric fall. Her eyes opened in astonishment at the cold air against her skin and the feel of my eyes on her bare skin.

As her breasts were freed from the restraining fabric of the bikini, they bounced enticingly, and her nipples grew larger and even harder under my sharp gaze.

She looked at me with wide eyes. But I didn’t give her a chance to become shy—I did what I longed to do.

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CHAPTER 24

ALESSIO

I latched my mouth around one of those succulent, hard nipples and pulled it into my mouth with my lips, hearing her cry out.

She tried to pull away from my face, but I held her firmly in place as I worked my lips and tongue around her ripe nipple, the feeling of her thick nub in my mouth making me even harder.

I transferred my lips to her other breast and gave that nipple the same attention, causing her to arch back her head in ecstasy. As I sucked at her breast, I snaked my free hand down her body until I reached her bikini bottoms and slipped my fingers inside.

I hissed as my fingers found her secret place.

Even in the water I could feel the copious slickness between her legs; I could feel her arousal and her need. After a fleeting rub against her clit, I

kissed her lips, and she returned my kisses as eagerly as I gave them.

I carried on kissing her and at the same time pushed her against the side of the pool, trapping her between my arms.

With one hand, I softly stroked the top of her thighs before hooking her bikini bottoms to one side and gently pushing my fingers along her slit again, reveling in the wetness of her arousal.

Her cheeks were flushed with arousal, and she gasped as I moved two fingers up and down from the opening of her sex up to her swollen clit.

I could feel the hard bud of her clit standing to attention between her pussy folds, and I felt her grind herself against my fingers, trying to increase the friction. But I wouldn't give her exactly what she wanted just yet. I teased her by alternating between whisper-soft strokes and hard rubs, making her clit ache and her rasps become needier.

Eventually, I felt her hand move tentatively down my chest and stomach until it reached my erection. And the look in her eyes was exactly what I had wanted, what I had been waiting for.

I climbed out of the pool and held out my hand to her. She hesitated before taking it and slowly walked up the steps of the pool and out of the water. I grabbed a towel and slowly dried her off as she clutched her undone bikini top to cover her breasts, shivering slightly. I wanted to rip that bikini top away again, but I let her have that small amount of modesty for now. She was still shy, and I didn't want to rush her.

After drying myself off, I discarded the towel. I put my hand against the small of her back. "Come," I instructed, and I took her hand as I led her back up to my bedroom, neither of us saying anything while we walked upstairs.

I could feel the tremor in her small hand, but I knew there was little I could say to ease her nervousness.

Once we reached my bedroom, I gently pulled her hands away from her breasts, making her bikini top fall open again. I sucked in my breath as I enjoyed the view all over again.

I reached my hands around her back and unfastened the clasp, letting the wet top fall to the floor, and then I removed her bikini bottoms.

She didn’t hide her body from me, and I was glad about that. I wanted to see her completely. I took her hand and led her to the bed, and she reclined against the pillows.

I laid down beside her, took her into my arms, and pressed my lips against hers again. I could kiss her forever. But tonight, I wanted something else too.

I pushed her back against the pillows and climbed on top of her, using my hands to part her legs and then resting my body between them. I carried on kissing her mouth and caressing her breasts, listening as her sighs became more urgent.

My hand slipped down again between her luscious thighs. I couldn’t help groaning out loud at how wet she had become, turned on as she was by my ministrations. I teased her clit, enjoying its slickness under my fingers, the feeling making my mouth water as I thought about how aroused she was.

I could feel how swollen her labia had become as they engorged with her carnal need. I gently tugged at her pussy lips, making her moan deeply, the sound going straight to my dick.

As I kissed her mouth, I swapped my fingers between her legs for my cock. I ran the large head of it up and down her soaking cleft, concentrating

on her swollen, slick clit. As I drew my hardness up and down her, she was panting as she squirmed against me.

I looked hard at her. “Do you want this?”

She met my intense gaze and looked at me before nodding. I could see she was in a high state of arousal and wanted this as much as me, although there was also a shadow of apprehension on her face.

“I’ll try to be as gentle as possible. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to, I promise.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

I could feel her tensing up as she thought about the possible pain, so I went back to gently kissing her and stroking her body and breasts until she was writhing under me and her breathing was coming in sharp pants again.

I lined myself up with her entrance. I had been tested a couple of days before our wedding and I was clean. And given that Cate was a virgin, she would also be clean, meaning that we could forgo condoms. Which was good because I wanted to feel every inch of her virginal pussy and mark it all with my thick, white cum.

While kissing her neck, I gently nudged at her tight opening with my erection. There was no way to avoid hurting her.

I entered slowly and paused when she cried out, her eyes widening. I watched her face carefully and gave her the time she needed to get used to the feel of me inside her, at the same time continuing to kiss her and reassure her. “It’s okay. That was the worst part. Are you ready for me to go on?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. I slowly withdrew from her pussy and then entered her again. She was very tight, and I could see it was painful for her.

Each time I entered her, I went slightly deeper. It was hard to hold myself back, but I carried on in this slow rhythm, pushing myself into her pussy inch by inch.

Each time I thrust into her, the feeling of her tight pussy around my dick was exquisite. I felt her channel gripping my erection. I thrust into her while looking deep into her hazel eyes. Her lips were slightly parted, and she was taking deep breaths to manage the pain.

After a while I could see her eyes change as my penetration deepened inside her and my cock began to arouse her and ignite her own passion.

After a while, I asked, “Do you want to come with me inside you, cara?”

She bit her lower lip and shook her head. “I don’t think I can.”

So, I sped up, enjoying the feel of her pussy clenching around my cock as I plunged deep inside her in a relentless rhythm.

As I felt my climax mount, I came with my face buried in her neck, groaning her name. “Fuck, Cate, you don’t know what you do to me!”

I spurted my seed deep inside her virgin pussy, releasing my lust toward her that had been building up over the last few weeks.

I don’t think I’d ever come so hard in my life, and I felt like a teenager again. After my breathing had slowed down, I looked at her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, but I knew I wanted sex to be pleasurable for her—for me to give as much to her as she had just given to me. She had given me the gift of her virgin pussy—she had entrusted it to me, and I wouldn’t let her down tonight.

I kissed her slowly, teasing her mouth and stroking her breasts at the same time. I was still on top of her, and I balanced my weight on one arm while using my free hand to push her thighs apart again.

I moved my fingers along her tender valley. “Fuck, you’re soaking wet from your pussy juices and my cum—the thought of your insides being covered with my semen, and the sight of your labia coated with it is so fucking hot.”

Her slit was glistening with moisture and the sight of it made me rock hard again, although I knew she would be too sore to go again so soon after her first time. I had marked her in the most primal way I could, making her my possession.

“You’re mine now—I own you and your pussy now.” My voice was hard with renewed desire.

As I spoke to her, I felt her slit flood with more dampness.

My bride liked it when I talked dirty to her. “You like my words, don’t you?”

I had her body caged against the mattress with my own body. She closed her eyes, but I wouldn’t allow that. “Open your eyes,” I commanded. “I want to look at you while my fingers are on your pussy.” I wanted to see every emotion that crossed her face, hear every gasp that came from her beautiful lips.

She opened her eyes, revealing her green and amber eyes. Every time I looked at her, I fell for her all over again. This girl would be my ruin.

She was too aroused now to hide behind her shyness. Her eyes were fixed on mine, her pupils wide with yearning. She bit her lower lip as she felt the rough pads of my calloused fingers work on her clit, swirling round and round with an enticing pressure, leading her to that illicit peak that she longed for and that I longed to give her.

“Please, Alessio…”

“Do you like it when I play with your pussy?” My voice was harsh with passion.

“Alessio…”

“Answer me when I ask you a question,” I demanded.

Just like the last time at her apartment, she disobeyed me and denied me the words I wanted to hear.

“Don’t play games,” I warned. “You’ll lose every time, cara.” My tone was fierce, conveying that I was deadly serious.

“Yes,” she moaned.

“Yes, what?” I interrogated her.

“Yes…I like it when you…play with my pussy…”

Even through her arousal, I could see her face flush red as she uttered the words that made my dick stiff again.

I moved my mouth to her nipple, sucking it hard and nipping it with my teeth, making her cry out before soothing it with my tongue. “Do you like it when I suck your tits, cara?”

“Yes…”

“Yes, what?” I said gruffly, my anger flaring at her continued disobedience.

“Yes, Alessio, I want…you to suck my nipples.” She cried out loudly. “Alessio, I can’t take much more…”

“You’ll take as much as I give you,” I growled, enjoying having her in my power and in my possession.

I continued teasing her pussy, enjoying every gasp and every moan, until I finally granted her an orgasm, bringing her to a climax. As she arched her back, she screamed out, and I carried on fondling her clit even when she begged me to stop. “Please, it’s too much, please Alessio,” she whimpered.

But I carried on, maximizing her climax until I finally removed my hand and let her close her thighs. I held her in my arms and watched her trying to get her breath back, enjoying the way her beautiful body was stretched out naked beside me and her lack of self-consciousness at this moment.

After a couple of minutes of lying like this, I said, “Wait here.” I went to the bathroom to get a washcloth.

Returning to the bed where she lay back, exhausted against the pillows, I kneeled between her legs and used my hands to gently part her thighs again. There was a blush on her cheeks as she came down from the high of her orgasm.

I gently cleaned her and when I’d finished, I pressed a kiss to the inside of her thighs.

Then I reached across to the nightstand, and opening the drawer, I pulled out what I needed.

Cate’s eyes widened as she caught sight of the glint of the metal coming toward her.

“W-What are you doing?” Cate’s voice hitched as she clambered to sit up.

I was still kneeling between her spread thighs, and I had to resist the urge to feast my eyes on her naked pussy which was beautifully swollen after what we’d just done together. “I need you to rest for a while,” I said softly.

She shook her head from side to side, as her words rushed out. “Why do you have a syringe?”

“Because it’s better this way.” I raised an eyebrow in question. “Now, are you going to be a good girl and let me do this?”

She didn’t answer me as her breath quickened, and I could see her eyes darting around as she looked for a way to get away from me.

Lunging to the side, she scrambled off the bed.

I sprung to my feet and grabbed her around the waist, pushing her back onto the bed, the air whooshing from her lungs as her back slammed against the mattress.

“No!” she cried. “Why are you doing this?” Her small hands tried to push the syringe away.

“Because I can,” I said in a rough voice as I anchored her legs underneath mine and restrained both her wrists easily in one hand while using the other hand to prick the needle into the base of her beautiful neck.

She exhaled sharply as the metal pierced her skin. “Alessio, please,” she pleaded.

But it was no good. I had spared her from being drugged when I’d brought her to Italy, but there was no other choice for what I had planned next. It was better she was unconscious for it.

I lowered my mouth to the tiny puncture mark on her skin, softly swiping my tongue over it. I didn’t like marking her, but there was no alternative.

She was still trying to fight me, but as the sedative took effect, her struggles against me became less frantic.

The primal part of me had relished dragging her back to my bed, and now I was enjoying her naked body writhing beneath mine.

My dick was hard again and aching.

I needed to get on with what I had planned. I needed something else first, though.

Cate was still vaguely conscious, and I turned her on her side and curled my body behind hers.

With one hand kneading her tit, I let my other hand slip between her creamy thighs and between her lips there.

Trailing my fingers between her folds and flicking them over her clit, she moaned softly and then tried to open her somnolent eyes. “Alessio…?” she murmured in a husky voice that made my cock harden to a steel rod.

Propping myself up on one elbow and looking down at her, I could see the confusion in her heavy-lidded eyes. “What are you…doing?” She tried to push my hand away from her thighs, but I didn’t let her as I felt her labia slicken with her wet arousal.

“My fingers can feel how much you want this,” I growled.

She tried to say something, but the sedative was dragging her under now.

“I can feel your pussy get wetter with every stroke from my fingertips. You can’t tell me that you don’t want this when your juices are running all over my fingers.”

She tried to squeeze her legs shut.

I shoved them apart with my hands. “Your pussy is mine now, do you understand?”

But she was too drowsy to respond.

I rolled her onto her back.

I’d only taken her a short while earlier, but the need to be inside her again consumed me completely.

Fisting my swollen erection, I penetrated her in one hard thrust, jolting her back to consciousness for a few moments.

I didn’t give her any more opportunity to fight me, instead taking her hard and fast so that the only thing she was capable of uttering were moans each time I plunged into her tightness.

Hitching her legs over my shoulders, I forced my cock as deep as it could go inside her, her tight pussy resisting my size at first, before stretching enough to accommodate my substantial girth.

She was unconscious now, the drug having finally taken full effect, but that made no difference to me.

I took out my frustrations from the past few weeks on her tight channel, grunting each time I sunk my thickness into her, taking her so deep that my balls were slapping against her slick pink labia.

She might be sore tomorrow, but it would be a reminder that she was mine now. Because after she gave me her body earlier tonight, I knew there was no way that I was ever letting her go. And I wasn't going to allow her to continue fighting me.

Tonight, I would put the first part of my plan into action.

Not being able to hold back any longer, I spurted my thick seed deep inside her, leaning down and kissing her as I did so.

She was oblivious now to what I was doing, but I loved having her compliant and submissive under me—even if it was only due to the sedative in her system.

While still emptying my sperm inside her, I pulled my cock out so that the last of my thick cum painted the inside of her thighs.

And once I was finished, I kneeled back on my haunches, watching with satisfaction as some of the thick white liquid ran back out of her and coated her pussy lips.

With my fingers, I spread the copious mixture of her pussy juices and my cum back down her inner thighs, relishing the leaving of my mark upon her perfect skin.

For a few minutes, I stayed in that position, enjoying the look of her as she lay pliant, her legs spread wide open for me, and her pussy lips still wet and swollen.

Then I got up from the bed and tugged on a pair of gray sweatpants. Grabbing my cell, I dialed the number of the person I wanted.

“I need you at the villa right away,” I barked before hanging up.

While I waited for him to arrive, I covered up Cate’s body with a bedsheet.

Twenty minutes later, I saw a car pull up in the drive. I had instructed the soldiers to let my visitor in and send him straight up to the bedroom.

A couple of minutes later, I heard a knock at the bedroom door.

I opened the door. “Come in, doctor.”

This was the man whom we used for medical issues and emergencies when we were visiting our Italian villa.

His brows bunched up as his gaze fell upon Cate. “I take it this is your wife. Is she unwell?” Marco had informed him as soon as we’d arrived in Italy, letting him know who was here and telling the doctor to be on standby in case we should need him for any reason.

“No, she’s not unwell. I gave her a sedative.”

He narrowed his gaze, knowing that he was probably not going to like what I said next.

“I need you to put a fertility implant in her.”

“For…?”

“You’re a doctor. Surely, I don’t need to explain it to you.”

“Is your wife having issues conceiving? I was under the impression that you were only recently married.”

“There are no issues. I want her pregnant as soon as possible.”

“At her age, and given the lack of issues, she really doesn’t need—”

“I didn’t ask for your advice.”

There was a long pause. “She has agreed to this?”

“No.” I saw no need to mince my words with this man.

“Alessio, I don’t think this is—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think. Get your equipment ready.”

He sighed. “I don’t carry fertility hormones with me as a matter of course.”

“No matter. I’ve already sourced exactly what I want.” I handed over the implant which would release hormones into her system over the next six months or until it was removed.

This was a relatively new implant which I had sourced from a medical contact. It avoided the need for regular shots—which was ideal in this situation because I didn’t want to have to drug Cate every single time I needed to give her a shot. But the implant had the disadvantage of being such a size that it necessitated making a small cut in the recipient’s skin in order to insert it.

I had already looked through the calendar Cate kept with her tampons. In it, she noted down the start of each of her periods. And from that, I had worked out her ovulation cycle.

Now that I’d finally been inside her, I would be taking her regularly, but I also had plans to step up our sexual encounters when she was most fertile.

Because I needed my seed in her. And I needed her belly round with my child.

I didn’t know what it was about this woman that made me lose all reason and all sanity.

I needed her like I needed oxygen.

And my heart needed her like it needed blood to keep beating.

She was the reason I lived now.

The doctor looked at me over the rim of his glasses, his expression making it clear that he was not in agreement with my plan. Taking out the necessary equipment, however, he set it out on a sterile tray.

“The best area for this sort of implant is the front of the hip. Please lower the sheet to her waist.”

Although he was a doctor, he was a man. And I wanted to kill him rather than let him look at my wife in a half-naked state.

Reluctantly, I carefully moved the sheet, although I didn’t lower it like the doctor had suggested. Instead, I adjusted it so that while Cate’s breasts and pussy were still covered, her right hip was now exposed.

The doctor swabbed the incision site, and after injecting a local anesthetic into the area, he picked up a scalpel. “You’re sure about this?”

“Positive,” I snapped. “Now get on with it.”

The doctor shook his head slightly as he moved the sheet to give himself better access. As he pushed the sheet too high, it revealed the bottom of Cate’s breast and puckered nipple, making me growl as I snatched at the sheet to cover her modesty.

“Alessio,” he sighed, “I’m a medical doctor. The human body is merely an object I treat.”

His words riled me further. Cate wasn’t an *object*. She was a fucking goddess.

I watched as he made a small incision just above her hipbone, my jaw locked as I watched him slice open her perfect skin. He then put the implant into position.

“I’ll just needed to stitch up the site and place a dressing over it.”

I didn’t take my eyes off the doctor as he worked on Cate.

“All done,” he said wearily as he packed up his equipment. “Keep the dressing site clean, and call me if there are any issues.”

He left the room, and I listened as he made his way down the staircase. I stood by the open bedroom window and watched him exit the villa and walk toward his car.

Picking up my gun, I slowly screwed on the silencer.

Then I aimed for the doctor’s head.

And got him in one shot.

He has seen more of Cate’s naked body than he had a right to see. Some might think my actions harsh, but not me. He should have taken more fucking care.

Picking up my cell, I dialed Camillo. “Get a clean-up crew to the front of the villa immediately.”

Next, I went to the bathroom and found Cate’s birth control pills. I assumed that she’d gotten these just before our marriage.

She wouldn’t be needing them any longer.

Twenty minutes later, Cate started to come around as the drug began to wear off. I had used a variety that only knocked a person out for a short time. The area the doctor had treated would be numb for the next few hours, so hopefully Cate wouldn’t notice anything until the morning since the sedative would leave her drowsy for the next few hours.

Because right now, all I wanted to do was to wrap her in my arms and fall asleep together.

After that, I climbed into bed with her and pulled her onto my chest.

“You’re too hot,” she mumbled.

“I don’t care. I want to see your face as you fall asleep tonight.”

She didn’t argue, and exhausted and drowsy, she relaxed in my hold.

This was the most serene I had seen her since I'd first met her. This was how I wanted her to be every day. At one with me, not fighting me at every turn, letting me give her pleasure, letting me own her.

I stayed awake for a long while after that, just watching her, enjoying the peaceful look on her face, and enjoying the feel of her naked body in my arms.

"I love you," I whispered into her hair as she drifted off to sleep.

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CHAPTER 25

ALESSIO

In the morning, I was awake before Cate and enjoyed looking at her peaceful form.

She probably wasn't going to be happy about my taking away her birth control, but I didn't care. I was still angered that she'd tried to break up with me before I dragged her ass to Italy. I had no doubt in my mind that if I hadn't threatened her with the syringe, she definitely wouldn't have come with me.

Goddamnit, I wanted her to be with me willingly, for this woman to feel the same way about me as I felt about her.

She stirred beside me, and as her eyelids fluttered open, I gave her a smile. "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

I saw the exact moment she recalled what had happened last night, as the peace left her expression and was replaced with a look of panic.

“What did you do to me last night?” Her fingers flew to her neck as she remembered the syringe I had injected her with. “Did you drug me?” Her words shot at me in accusation.

“Yes,” I replied simply.

The pitch of her voice increased. “But why?” Her sudden movement made her wince, and she pulled down the sheet to examine where the pain was coming from. She was so rattled that she didn’t even notice or care that in doing so, she revealed her sumptuous nakedness to me, making my dick instantly rock hard.

Not only were her tits gorgeous, but I couldn’t stop my mind thinking about how in a few months they would hopefully become heavy and engorged with milk, and her nipples would turn into ripe peaks which would feed our child.

“Why did you drug me?” Cate asked again, her words jolting me away from my thoughts.

“Because it was the easiest way.”

Her fingers gingerly ran over the dressing. “What have you done to me? Did you *cut* me again?”

“Yes, but it was for good reason. I needed the doctor to give you an implant.”

Her face slightly relaxed. “For contraception? But I’m already on birth control.”

“No. It’s an implant with fertility drugs. It will help you become pregnant more quickly.”

“Pregnant?” she practically yelled. “And fertility drugs? What the hell, Alessio? What in God’s name makes you think that *I want to have a baby with you*?”

It was a struggle not to let her words anger me. “You are my wife now. You must know that it is expected that you will produce babies with me. That is one of the main purposes of an arranged marriage, after all.”

“Any marriage, whether arranged or not, should involve both parties deciding when—*and if*—they want children. It shouldn’t be up to the caveman husband to drug his wife so that he can implant her with further drugs while she is unconscious.”

With Cate’s flustered movements, the sheet was now halfway down her legs. She stilled as she glimpsed down. “What’s on my thighs?” Her eyes darted back up to mine. “Is this…your cum?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do this while I was unconscious?” Her tone was harsh as her eyes narrowed.

“You were still conscious.”

“I don’t remember it, so I couldn’t have been,” she snapped.

“You got wet as soon as I stroked your pretty pussy, and you moaned my name. Which means that you weren’t completely out of it.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. “You’re unbelievable,” she hissed, scrambling from the bed with the sheet wrapped tightly around her and rushing into the bathroom.

Soon, I heard the sound of the shower, and when I walked into the bathroom a minute later, I could see her through the clear glass as she furiously washed my seed from her inner thighs.

She might easily have washed away what was visible on her skin, but she wouldn’t be able to wash away the cum I had spurted deep into her tight pussy last night.

And I planned to be doing a lot more of that from now on.

After Cate had finished her shower and dried off, she wrapped her soft robe around herself and went to her make-up bag on the counter.

As she rummaged in it, I knew exactly what she was looking for—she always followed exactly the same routine each morning.

She spun on her heel and glared at me. “What have you done with my birth control pills?”

“You obviously won’t be needing them anymore. I told you, I want you to have my baby now.”

“You can’t just do this!”

“I can, and I will,” I gritted out, not liking what was tantamount to her rejection of me. “You have no choice in the matter.”

With one last glare at me, she stormed out of the bathroom.

CATE

I couldn’t believe I had allowed last night to happen.

I had let him have sex with me.

And even that hadn’t been enough for him. Because afterward, he’d drugged me and had an implant put inside me. What the hell was happening?

I covered my face with my hands and groaned as something else came back to me.

I remembered falling asleep in his arms. *And then he'd said he loved me.*

He was delusional and a control freak, intent on messing with my mind.

My face blazed when I thought about the things I had let him do to me.

As I moved, my inner soreness only served to further remind me of what had happened between us a matter of hours ago. I'd let him have me—and not only that, I'd enjoyed it. As much as I hated him after what he'd done to me, I'd also wanted him last night. Jesus, what was wrong with me?

I was in the bedroom, dressed in denim shorts and a turquoise top, brushing my wet hair when he came out and stood behind me. There were angry tears in my eyes.

He stood staring at me through the mirror, his hair wet and his dark brown eyes intensely fixed on me. "Look, it was just sex." He was trying to make me feel better.

"You take advantage of me when I'm confused." I couldn't help the accusing note in my voice. I didn't know why, but I was more angry about the sex than the implant.

"You didn't seem confused last night. I would have stopped if you had said no, but you were clearly into it as much as me."

His flippant tone riled me.

I turned around and slapped him.

It happened before I knew what I was doing. As I heard my hand smack against his cheek, I felt shock overwhelm me. I'd never slapped anyone in my life.

I looked at him, and I could see by his face that he was angry.

ALESSIO

I told myself that she was acting like a child.

She'd had time to get used to the situation, but she was deliberately being difficult, labeling me as the bad guy when all I was trying to do was protect her.

Deep down, however, I knew I was angry because she was fighting me. And she was fighting the feelings she had for me.

I'd had enough of this. If she wanted me to be the bad guy, then I could do that too. I grasped her arm.

"You won't do that again," I growled.

"You may have forced me to come here and put an implant inside me, but I still control my decisions and my body's reactions," she hissed.

"That's where you're wrong, cara. I own you now—including your body."

I watched her pale throat swallow as I took a step closer to her and trailed a finger over her breast, her nipple tightening under her clothing in response.

"Your father signed you over to me in the contract. I can make you do whatever I want now," I said in a dangerous tone.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so brutal in my words; perhaps I should have said that I wouldn't hurt her. But I did want to be brutal to her, and I did want to hurt her.

My passion for her fed off a darkness within me.

Having her at my mercy appeased the anger I felt at what her father had done to the Fratellanza, and tempered the rage I had at the knowledge that she would have refused to marry me if she had been given a true choice.

Fucking her tight cunt last night hadn't been enough for me.

I needed to possess her wholly and for her to surrender to me completely.

“You’ll do what I say, and you’ll obey me,” I said harshly.

“Or what?” She tried to sound defiant and shake off my hold, but there was a slight tremble in her voice.

“I’ve tried to make things as easy as possible for you.”

“What, by going behind my back and getting my father to sign the engagement contract, by forcing me to marry you, and by dragging me to Italy away from my whole life?” The amber flecks in her hazel eyes danced as she gave a harsh laugh.

“I am your life now. This marriage is your life.” My tone was emotionless.

“Well, I don’t want it to be,” she cried.

“You were born into this world, just like the rest of us. There’s no escape for any of us."

“So, I’m your prisoner now?”

“No, this life imprisons us all. If you want to be my prisoner, I can arrange that.” She needed to understand the reality of her situation. “I’ve tried to make this as easy as possible for you.”

“No, you haven’t.” Bitterness suffused her words. “You enjoy tormenting me, playing with me and my emotions. You like keeping me in this prison.”

“Do I? I can make this a prison if that’s what you want. Starting now. Maybe that will make you start behaving.”

“What are you talking about?” Her voice trembled.

I turned my mind off to her emotions. I wanted to make Cate mine, body, and soul, but she wouldn’t stop fighting me and fighting the love I was trying to give her. She wouldn’t let me in, no matter what I did to make her happy.

I had let her stay in her apartment and had moved from the mansion to be there with her, and I had let her carry on working—something almost unheard of in our Mafia circle. But most of all, I hadn't forced her on our wedding night—most Made Men I knew would have no hesitation in taking their bride forcefully.

But despite all this, despite waiting until she was ready to consummate our relationship and taking her gently the first time instead of in the raw, primal way I had wanted, she continued to throw it all back into my face.

She made no secret of the fact that she thought I was a monster, holding her effectively as my prisoner and later forcing her to marry me.

But that was who I was, and I wouldn't apologize for it. I had been born into the Mafia, into this way of life which entangled one's soul with violence, blood, and death.

It had made me who I was, and it was that man who had fallen for Cate, the enemy's daughter, the daughter of a traitor who had threatened the stability of the Fratellanza which was at the core of my existence.

I didn't feel a gentle love for Cate—I didn't even know if I was capable of such tender affection.

Instead, my need for her was a fierce desire to possess her and to own her in every way, to make her submit to my will—and if she wouldn't, to punish her and make her suffer like I was suffering through my need for her.

I looked at her and hardened my gaze. "I've allowed you all sorts of freedoms and liberties until we had to come to Italy, such as staying in your apartment. I haven't forced you to have sex with me—I've given you all the time you've needed. I've let you carry on working. When we get back to Chicago, I can easily put a stop to that."

“No! I love my job and seeing the children. It keeps me sane, and I need to keep on working.”

“And your grandmother, when we were in Chicago, I let you carry on phoning her each morning and talking to her. I was going to let you call her from here once we had the secure line set up.”

“You *were* going to let me?” Cate’s voice became wary as she took in the significance of my words. “Please, you have to let me call her.”Her words came tumbling out in a rush. “I’ll give up working if you want that. But you have to let me stay in contact with my grandmother.”

I stayed silent.

“You know that she’s been unwell. After what happened with my father, she’ll be devastated if I break off contact. Please don’t do that,” she whispered.

I paused before speaking again. “It all depends on you now—if you’re willing to accept your new life with me.” I looked hard at her. “I’m going down for breakfast now.”

I went downstairs. I waited for a few minutes, but she didn’t follow me.

I got out the pan I used for making pancakes and started to cook. Usually cooking relaxed me, but not this morning.

She kept saying she was in a prison. So, I would treat her like a prisoner if that’s what she wanted.

And the sooner she was pregnant with my child, the better.

Deep down, I was angry and annoyed because I told her last night that I loved her. And this morning she was acting like this.

I just couldn’t get through to her. I couldn’t make her understand that I was trying to protect her.

I looked up as I heard someone approaching—although I couldn't see anything of the person because all I could see was the big bundle of fur they were carrying in their arms.

"Christ, Marco, why the fuck are you carrying Mr. F around? He's got four legs the last time I checked."

"Juliana says he's exhausted."

"Yeah, he has such a tiring life with all that eating, sleeping, snoring, and slobbering that he does."

My brother scowled at me. "She says he's jetlagged. She was worried he wouldn't come done for breakfast by himself and asked me to carry him down."

"When have you ever known Greedy Guts not to come hurtling over as soon as there's any mention of food?"

"Look," he growled, "Juliana's got high blood pressure, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep her happy, especially now she's pregnant." He set the animal down in one of the dining chairs and then attempted to brush the rust-colored fur off his black shirt.

"You know you look stupid carrying around that gigantic fluffball?"

"No one asked for your opinion," he snapped.

"Whipped," I muttered, despairing at how my brother acted when it came to his wife. I'd never imagined before he'd met her that he could ever soften for a woman, but he and Juliana were soulmates.

Mr. F was eyeing the stack of pancakes I had already set on the table, his furry snout twitching as his tongue hung out.

"Don't even think about it if you value your life," I said sternly, moving the pancakes further away from him.

Juliana and Camillo arrived downstairs and took their places at the table.

Ten minutes later, I concealed my surprise when Cate also came down and joined us.

It was obvious she'd been crying and that we'd had an argument.

Marco and Juliana diplomatically kept conversation casual over breakfast, and even Camillo managed to avoid putting his foot in it for once.

As Marco got up from the table at the end of the meal, he stopped by my side.

"Camillo told me about last night and the clean-up crew. What the fuck, Alessio? Do you know how hard it is to find a doctor in the vicinity who's discreet enough that his wife and his ma don't go blabbing our business all over the Italian countryside within five minutes of him leaving here?"

My gaze darted to Cate, but she was too much within her own thoughts to pay any attention to what Marco was saying. Even though she hadn't actually met him as she'd been unconscious, I didn't think she would like the news that the doctor who'd treated her last night was now dead.

"You'll find another one," I drawled, not letting him draw me into an argument.

"What did you need the doc for anyway?" he grumbled.

"This and that," I said vaguely.

"Well, you got rid of him, so you can find his fucking replacement," my brother snarled before storming off. He was such a moody bastard.

After we had eaten breakfast, Cate came down and sat by the pool without my having to ask her, and she also came to all meals without being prompted by me.

***

That night in bed, Cate turned to me. “We can have sex if you want to,” she said tentatively.

I snapped on the lamp on my nightstand. My body was throbbing with need, and I had been hard for her before I had even got into bed, and now her proximity to me was making my balls ache and tension coil inside me.

She looked nervous as I watched her closely.

I sighed, controlling my breath as I exhaled slowly. “I want you to stop fighting me at every turn.”

“And if I do that…I can still talk to my grandmother?” Her voice was almost a plea.

I didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “If you show me that you’re not going to let memories of your old life stop you from getting on with this new life with me, then we can trial you carrying on with your job and speaking to your grandmother.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Do you really want sex?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

She didn’t reply.

“You can tell me the truth, Cate.”

She shook her head.

I could easily force her small body to obey me and submit to me. I would enjoy holding her thighs apart and forcing my dick into her tight pussy.

I was disappointed she didn’t want sex with me, but I wouldn’t force her.

I could tell that her body wasn’t unaffected by me. I wanted to fuck her in a raw, primal way, and I wanted to coat her pussy with my seed and make

her pregnant with my child. But I wouldn't let my darkness overcome me tonight. Not when I could tell she was still upset. I wanted her to think of her life with me differently to how she viewed her own parent's marriage. I wanted her to trust me and know that I would look after her.

"Let's just sleep tonight," I said, switching off the lamp and pulling her onto my chest and wrapping my arms around her.

Despite my words, my dick was hard against her slender thigh. I knew she could feel it and the hunger within me, and I could feel the tension in her muscles as my strong arms encircled her body and grasped her firmly in my hold.

I hoped that tonight's conversation might have reassured her, especially after what I'd done with the implant, but I could see it was going to take some time to get her to trust me.

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CHAPTER 26

ALESSIO

The next day, we managed to set up the call to Cate's grandmother.

Danio had gotten everything set up so that the call couldn't be traced to our location in Italy. We had other homes around the world and as far as the FBI was concerned, we could be at any one of them.

I stood next to her while she talked, listening to ensure she didn't give our location away.

"Nonna, it's me, Cate. I'm so sorry I haven't been able to call you before now."

"Cate, darling, I have been so worried about you."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want you to worry. I wanted to call you before now, but I couldn't."

“Don’t worry, one of Alessio’s men came to see me to explain. I understand why you couldn’t call me, but that hasn’t stopped me from worrying.”

“I can’t say where we are…”

“I know, I know, it’s better not to say anything. It’s better that way. Just as long as I know you’re okay.”

“Yes, I’m okay, but I wish I could come home.”

“I wish that too. But your place is to be with your husband now. The men will sort it all out soon enough. Until then you have to stay safe.”

“Enough about me, Nonna. How have you been?”

“Oh, you know me. I’ve been fine. I’ve been trying to keep busy. The other ladies have been trying to keep my mind off things, but lately it’s just been one thing after another.”

“I know, and I’m sorry for all that. I don’t want you to be worrying, it’s not good for you. Please tell me that you’re taking care and trying to keep your stress levels down?”

“Yes, yes, don’t you worry about me.”

“I should be able to call you sometimes now.”

“Well, make sure you do what your new husband says. He will keep you safe.”

Afterward, I could see that the call had upset Cate and I couldn’t stop looking at her and worrying about her, although I could see that she was trying to hold back the tears in her eyes.

“I’ve got a headache,” she said quickly. “I think I’m going to get some fresh air.”

I watched her back as she rushed outside. I thought about going after her, but I decided to give her some space and time to herself.

Marco had also been in the room while Cate had spoken to her grandmother. I turned to him. “Now that both her parents and brother are gone, I’m glad Cate at least has her grandmother to talk to.”

Marco stared at me and then surprised me by asking me something he never talked about. “Alessio, do you ever miss Mom?” Marco and I never spoke to each other about her or what had happened.

“Yeah, I do.” I didn’t even need to think about my answer.

Marco frowned, but then replied, “Yeah, me too.”

***

By dinner that evening, Cate was back to pretending that she was fine.

However, I could clearly see she was unhappy, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She was making an effort to act normally, but I couldn’t help but notice that she was reticent and mentally distant.

As we sat down to dinner, Juliana slammed a plate down in front of me.

“Juliana,” warned Marco, narrowing his gaze at her.

She pasted a sickly-sweet smile onto her face. “I hope you enjoy your meal, Alessio.”

“Thanks,” I said drily.

I eyed the plate of food in front of me. Juliana had made chicken parmigiana and served it with potatoes and a salad. I had noticed that at dinner each night, Juliana had been deliberately dishing up the most burned bits onto my plate, and tonight was no exception.

She was obviously still annoyed at me for the whole Cate situation. I knew from what Marco had said that Juliana didn't approve of how I'd arranged the marriage without consulting Cate. From the looks Juliana kept giving me, I knew she wouldn't be happy until I choked on one of her meals.

As we ate, Cate shrunk back from the dog who had approached the table. She edged closer to me, and I could see that Juliana's pet was making her nervous.

"Camillo, for Christ's sake, will you stop feeding that damn dog at the table," I snapped. "It's no wonder he always hovers at mealtimes, what with you constantly feeding him bits from your plate."

"I wouldn't be feeding him if there weren't so many burned bits in my food that I wanted to get rid of," he mumbled in response.

"Camillo, put a fucking lid on it," growled Marco.

Marco was very protective of Juliana and didn't want any criticism of her cooking upsetting her, especially now that she was pregnant. Our swift exit from the States to avoid the FBI had caused Juliana's blood pressure to rise, and the doctor Marco had taken her to see at the Italian clinic said she needed to reduce her stress levels for the sake of the baby.

I couldn't help hoping that Cate, too, would be pregnant soon.

That night after I had got into bed with Cate and turned off the lamp on my nightstand, everything was silent.

Then I sensed Cate turn toward me and I felt her come willingly into my arms, resting her head on my shoulder. Usually, I always had to pull her into my hold.

We lay like that for a couple of minutes and then Cate moved her hand down until she reached the waistband of my boxer briefs.

I grabbed her hand and stopped her. She was trying to initiate sex with me.

“No,” I gritted out. “I love you and I want you, but I don’t want sex as gratitude in exchange for calling your grandmother.”

I knew that was the reason why she was doing this, and that wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted her to come to me willingly, not because she felt obligated to have sex with me in return for the privileges I granted her.

“Now go to sleep.” My voice was harder than I intended, but I was angry with her, and I was even more angry with myself.

My need for her was like a blazing fire deep inside me.

However, I needed not just her body, but also her mind and her soul.

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CHAPTER 27

ALESSIO

In the days that followed, Cate moved past her initial anger.

And although she was trying to act fine, I was worried that she was perhaps falling into a mild depression.

She spent time with us during the day and during meals, but she was always quiet then. She would answer my questions and she was definitely not sulking, but she often seemed far away.

She sat by the pool with us; however, she always read her book rather than talking or swimming. I noticed that she'd been stuck at the start of the same book for over a week now. She looked at the pages, but she didn't seem to take it in.

"Isn't it a good book?" Juliana asked one day.

"Oh no, it's great," she answered, her smile overly bright.

I watched as Juliana put her hand on Cate's arm and spoke quietly to her. "These Marchiano men…they're quite high maintenance. I've been through it myself, so I'm here if you ever need to talk."

"Thanks," whispered Cate back to her. I didn't know if Cate would take Juliana up on her offer—she struck me as a private person who seemed to keep her thoughts and emotions to herself.

I knew Cate liked to draw, so I got all sorts of art supplies for her. "I got you some things for drawing today, cara."

"Oh, yes?"

"I know you like to draw, so I got you some equipment since all your stuff is back in Chicago."

She looked politely through it all. "It's great," she said in a subdued tone.

"Do you want to try some of this out now? I'll set it up for you if you like?"

"I'll use it later, thank you."

It was as if a light had gone off inside of her. She didn't even touch any of the art equipment over the course of the next few days. I brought it out to the pool one day and got the easel, paper, and charcoals out and set up for her. She sat in front of the easel, but she just stared at the blank paper.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, um…artist's block." But in Chicago, she had been happy to draw whatever was around her.

That night, as we got undressed for bed, I asked, "Cate, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Her unresponsiveness made my hackles rise and made my emotions stir up with a violent intensity.

"Each day you just go through the motions, but I can tell you're unhappy."

She didn’t say anything. Her reticence made it difficult to talk to her, to get anything out of her.

“Cate?”

She sighed. “I guess I just don’t like being away from Chicago and Nonna.”

“It’s more than that. I can tell you’re not happy with things between you and me.” I had tried to be patient with her, and I was trying to keep my voice calm, but I was struggling when she acted like this with me.

“I’m doing everything you’ve asked,” she blurted out. “I’m spending all my time with the family every day and eating all my meals with you…” Her words trailed off.

“Go on, what’s the issue then?”

“I don’t know…” Her voice was soft. She was a mass of contradictions and was driving me mad.

She was polite and compliant when she was with me, yet she defied me by concealing her real emotions from me. She tried to appear strong, but everything about her recent behavior underlined just how vulnerable she was.

A few moments ago, I was enraged with her, but now an overwhelming sense of protectiveness washed over me. I took her hand in mine. “Look, we won’t be here forever. Just until we sort out the situation between the FBI and the Fratellanza—”

“I’m sick of my life being dictated by the needs of the Fratellanza,” snapped Cate, snatching her hand away from mine.

“Cate, just listen to me—”

“No, I won’t. I can’t. I’m coming from a situation where I don’t give a fuck about the Fratellanza. I just don’t care. You just want to own me, make

me your possession, make me submit to your power."

"You know it's not like that. Surely you can see how much I care about you? I really do—please believe that. Come here…"

"No," said Cate as she struggled out of my hold. She was withdrawing from me again, not just physically but also emotionally.

"Cate—"

"No, I can't. You don't get it."

"I do get it. I do understand."

"No, you don't."

"I know how you are feeling now, believe me. There are reasons why I am the way I am. Cate, talk to me. Please."

"I can't do this or be here with you right now." She tried to walk away.

"You're just running away."

"No, I'm not."

"Open up, cara, and tell me how you're feeling," I said as I wrapped my arms around her tightly and refused to let her walk away. I needed to make her feel secure here with me, in my life, and as my wife.

She struggled against my hold but gave up once she realized I wasn't going to let her go. After a few moments, she said quietly, "It's hard. It's just really hard." I didn't need to see her face to know she was crying.

"I know it's hard," I whispered into the top of her hair.

"It's just not easy for me. Every time I care about someone, they go away."

"I understand how you're feeling."

"No, you don't. You willingly took an oath to join the Fratellanza. I wasn't given a choice in any of it. It's completely different for you."

“No, it isn’t. We all suffer in this Mafia world, in this way of life that we’ve been thrust into since the day we were born. I didn’t choose to be born into this family. There was no choice over taking the oath—I knew what was expected of me and what I had to do. This life fucks up families, yours and mine. You know what happened to my mom…so I understand how you feel, really I do.”

Cate had been holding back her tears until then, but now they fell. “I wish I could have my mom back,” she whispered. “Losing her is why I can’t care for anyone else—losing someone you love just hurts too much, and despite what people say, the pain never gets any easier.”

I took her face between my hands. “I know you care about me, cara. You’re lying to yourself. I know you love me. I know you do because I can feel it—because I care about you and love you. I like having you here and I like being here with you. I don’t like seeing you unhappy when you’re with me.”

I pulled away from her slightly and looked deep into her eyes to try and see how she felt. “I’m here for you, Cate. I’m here.”

CATE

The next morning, I heard Alessio get out of bed and I was snuggling back down to sleep when I felt the bed covers ripped off me. I was barely awake. “Oh God, what are you doing?” I groaned.

“You’re coming for a run with me.” As usual, it was a statement—he didn’t waste words by bothering to ask me what I wanted.

“I don’t want to.”

“You told me you like running.” I didn’t remember telling him that, but obviously he had memorized everything I had ever said to him.

“We can go later.” I knew I wouldn’t want to go later either, but at least this might get him off my back for now.

“No, it will be too hot then. You told me going for a run first thing makes you feel good. It will make you feel better if we go now.”

“I wish you would just stop analyzing my moods. You’re suffocating me,” I snapped.

His voice lost its playful edge and became hard. “I’m suffocating you?”

I stayed silent. It was too early in the morning to have one of these intense conversations with him.

He didn’t say anything for a few moments, as if he was trying to rein in his annoyance at me. “So, what would you say is the matter right now?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me except for the fact I had to marry you and then was dragged away from my work, my life, and my family in Chicago,” I said sharply.

After what had happened with my mom and brother, I had retreated into my own precisely controlled world. At school I became sensible and studious, getting good grades, and afterward I focused on my job at the school. These were things I could influence, and I had worked hard to make a life for myself away from the Fratellanza. I chose my friends carefully and didn’t take any risks—no wild nights out at clubs or drinking myself into oblivion. It was a life that almost felt safe and secure.

I knew I was also worried about my job. My principal relied on me and had been good to me, and I didn’t want to let her down. I had been let down in my life, and I had always been determined not to do the same to other people.

Alessio raked his hand through his dark hair. “We’re working on sorting things out with the FBI and once that’s done, then we can go back home to Chicago.”

“When will that be?”

“I’m not sure yet. But we’re getting there. The whole situation is really frustrating and I’m just glad that we have people in Chicago we trust enough to look after Danio and Debi.”

“Look, can you just stop waking me up by dragging the bedsheets off me? How would you like it if I kept doing that to you?”

“I wouldn’t mind if it meant that my wife was interested in seeing my body.”

I felt heat rise up in my cheeks and quickly changed the direction of the conversation. “I can’t come running—I don’t have any workout clothes.”

“Stop fighting me.” Alessio’s voice suddenly changed tone again. “I’ve already warned you of the consequences if you keep on fighting me.”

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CHAPTER 28

CATE

His words made a stab of fear jolt my nerves and made my heart beat a little too fast. I reluctantly got out of bed and hugged my arms around myself. “What do you want me to wear?”

“Any shorts and top will do.”

When I didn’t make a move, he added, “Or I’ll drag you out in your nightwear.” I knew he probably would do that as well.

I stomped over to the dresser and dug through the drawers to find some suitable clothing. While I rummaged through the drawers, I noticed Alessio frowning as I messed up his neat, color-coded piles of clothes. I knew I was rummaging harder than necessary, deliberately making more of a mess than normal.

Once we were both dressed, Alessio grabbed my hand and led me down the stairs and out into the grounds of the villa. I dragged my heels—I really wasn't in the mood to do this.

He started off at a slow jog and I fell into pace beside him. It was warm even at this time of the morning. He was right—there was no way I would go for a run later when it got even hotter.

Normally I would listen to music when I ran but given that I didn't have my music with me, there was nothing I could do except run in silence—there was no way that I was going to talk to Alessio just to fill in the quiet. Anyway, I needed to concentrate to keep up with Alessio in the heat. I wasn't used to running in this sort of temperature, and I could feel the sweat dripping down my back and trickling between my breasts.

I was soon out of breath and saw Alessio look across at me.

"Do you need to take a break, cara?"

I didn't *need* to take a break, although I sure wanted to—but I definitely wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting that I was struggling as the morning sun beat down on us. I shook my head at him, not wasting my precious breaths on using words. Just saying that I wanted to take a break while running seemed to me like I would be admitting to a weakness.

I don't know why I found it so hard to admit my vulnerabilities to people. It felt easier to shut people out, to carry on by myself—that way I couldn't be let down by anyone.

Alessio set a solid pace and after running a circuit around the villa's grounds, he set course down the steps to the private beach, finishing when we reached the water's edge.

The breeze gently blowing off the sea was a welcome relief, and I gratefully accepted the water bottle he held out to me.

“So, did you enjoy that?” he asked me, stripping off his white t-shirt. This was the first time I had seen him in a color other than black or a dark tone, I thought to myself, although he still had a revolver tucked into the waistband of his shorts, plus his knife holster strapped on his thigh.

He was always prepared for whatever might happen—everything in his life was meticulously planned and I doubted he ever got up in the morning and just pulled on the first clothes he laid his hands on. He liked to be in control and planned everything with military-like precision.

“Enjoy isn’t the right word…although it did make me feel a bit better,” I admitted, as I sat on the fine, white sand, gulping down the water and looking out at the rich blue of the sea.

“Good, that’s all I want.” He sat down beside me and leaned back on his elbows, enjoying the view before us as we sat in comfortable silence.

After a while, he stood up and held out his hand to me, and for once, I let him help me as I wearily got to my feet.

“You confuse the hell out of me,” I blurted out.

Alessio cocked his head to one side as he regarded me. “Look, I told you I like you. I know you like me as well. So why the hell are we playing games?”

I didn’t know how to answer him. I couldn’t understand the dark magnetism that was pulling us together.

“I want to see what you and I could be, cara. We’re standing here right now, and all I want to do is kiss you. That’s the honest truth.”

I sighed. “It’s just…I don’t know.” And it was true. I didn’t know why I was always fighting him, but I also didn’t know what I really wanted.

Without warning, he pulled me in for a kiss, firmly gripping the back of my head with his large hand but pressing his lips to me ever so softly.

The kiss was at complete odds with his strength and the raw masculinity that was coming off him in stormy waves. I could smell his soap and a trace of sandalwood under the scent of his clean sweat, reminding me of how he smelled when we had sex that night after swimming in the pool.

My fingers clung to the tops of his muscled arms, feeling the slick sweat on his bare skin. I felt lightheaded as his tongue lightly teased mine and I told myself it must be the heat of the sun that was making me feel this way.

It was just a short, sweet kiss, for once making no demands of me. I didn't understand this man. At times like now, I could see myself falling for him—for the softer man behind the harsh mask of the Made Man.

It was incomprehensible to me that I could feel this way about him after everything he had done, including the implant. At times like this, I could imagine us being happy together and even having children together. What he had done with the implant had angered me, but now part of me thought about what it would be like to have children with him and to build a family with him.

He was protective of me in his own warped way. He made me feel cared for and always wanted to spend time with me. More significantly, he let me call Nonna every morning now—he understood how important this was to me and how much my grandmother meant to me. If he really was a monster, and if he really did want to punish me for my father's sins, surely he wouldn't allow me to make these calls?

No matter how busy he was with work and business, he always seemed to put me first, thinking of little things like running me a bath with scented oils or giving me a massage to relax me.

The only demand he made of me was that I participated every day in this world he had woven for us—in this land of make-believe, where I was his

willing wife and the past hadn’t happened.

I wondered what might have happened between us if we had just met like a normal guy and a normal girl? Would I have fallen for him? Would I have been able to see past his darkness, past the Made Man in him, and instead have embraced all the good things in him—the good things that were drawing me to him now, making me yearn for his touch and for something more between us.

***

After that day, Alessio insisted that we go for a run together every morning. He wouldn’t leave me alone until I got up and joined him, so I had no choice but to go with him.

One afternoon, as I lay out in the sun, Juliana came and joined me, stretching out on the sun lounger next to me.

“It’s so beautiful here,” sighed Juliana. “You’re lucky. I didn’t get a honeymoon—I just got kidnapped.”

I’d heard what had happened to her, and I didn’t really understand her relationship with Marco. I wondered how well she and the Capo got on. She seemed good with him, and they were having a baby together, but maybe it was just Stockholm Syndrome on her part?

Was this what was happening between Alessio and me? Was I developing feelings for him in the same way? Maybe I had to get away from him before he made me pregnant too?

The thought of having children with him, however, didn't entirely repel me.

Trying to take my mind off Alessio, I asked her, "How are things with your family now?"

Juliana's face fell. "The most difficult thing is that my relationship with my younger sister has really suffered. She's only a year younger than me and we've always been super close. Something's not right with her, but she won't confide in me anymore. I can't stand to see her hurting."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," I said sincerely while hoping that my relationship with Nonna wouldn't change now that I was married.

Juliana looked across at me. "It's nice having another girl to talk to. You know, just being in this family and being a Marchiano wife means that we probably need therapy. I reckon there should be something like Mandatory Mafia Therapy which all couples have to attend."

I grinned, thinking that I was going to get on with this girl. "That sounds good, although I don't think the guys would ever agree to that."

"Yeah, it's a bit hard to do couples therapy when your other half won't attend. You know what Made Men are like—all alpha and macho and unable to talk about emotions."

I flushed, thinking that my problem was that Alessio wanted to talk about emotions too much. He wanted to get into my mind and kept confusing me by saying he loved me.

I looked across at Juliana. "I don't think Marco likes me." I was pretty wary around the Capo, and he definitely didn't give off the friendliest vibe—which I guess was understandable given what my father had done.

"Oh, don't worry about him. He's always moody. He's worried about the whole FBI situation, and in particular about Danio and Debi being left

behind in the States."

As I looked at Juliana, I thought that she really was stunning. Her startling blue eyes were particularly mesmerizing, and I could see why the Capo had fallen for her.

"Hey, I've got an idea," said Juliana, her face lighting up. "Instead of couples therapy, we can go to sisters-in-law therapy."

I thought about that for a few seconds. "Um…I don't see how that would work. We don't have any issues with one another, do we?"

"That doesn't matter." She spoke quickly, obviously excited about her idea. "You can talk about your issues, and I can pretend to be Alessio."

"Um, I don't understand how that would work…"

"You'll say something like '*I'm unhappy because I don't like living with Mr. Fluffy.*' Then I'll be Alessio and say, '*Don't worry, Cate, I'll protect you from the big bad doggy.*'" Juliana had put on an over-the-top gruff voice as she pretended to be Alessio. She was on a roll now. "Then I'll talk about my issues with Marco. And you'll just have to act all moody and too-cool-for-school and cuss a lot—and you'll be Marco to a tee."

I frowned. "I don't think Marco would like me trying to imitate him—"

"Of course I wouldn't," I heard growled into my ear, making me jump out of my skin and give a little scream. "Which is why you're not going to do it," said Marco darkly as he looked down at me.

"You shouldn't creep up on people like that," I said, my voice shaking as I shifted my body away from him.

Juliana rolled her eyes. "Ignore him—he just likes to scare people."

"Well, he's pretty good at it," I muttered, putting my hand on my chest, trying to calm down my galloping heart rate.

***

A week later, while Alessio swam in the pool, I unpacked and set up the art supplies he had bought for me. They had remained untouched since the day he had purchased them, and this was the only time I had felt interested enough to get them out.

I sat for a long while just looking around myself, at the villa and the views. Normally I would happily draw anything, but lately I hadn't felt in the mood for it and nothing inspired me, not even our gorgeous surroundings.

Eventually I started to draw Mr. Fluffy, who had yet again snuck onto Alessio's sun lounger and was lying fast asleep on it, snoring away. Once I started, I quickly became engrossed, and without realizing it, a relaxing sensation came over me as I allowed my art to consume me.

After Alessio finished his laps in the pool, he climbed out and reached for a towel. I couldn't keep my eyes from flicking to his strong body, watching as beads of water rolled down his ripped torso and muscled thighs, reminding me of the sweat dripping down his body as it pounded between my legs. I felt my core tighten and heat rush through me.

As I watched him, he walked over to me. "Sorry the dog keeps hanging around. He likes to be near people."

Juliana chipped in, "He likes to be near *you*, Alessio, as he knows you like him really. That's why he always heads for your sun lounger."

"I don't mind him while he's asleep," I said, and it was true. "I've never drawn an animal before, so it's a bit of a challenge—how to get the texture

of the fur right and the expression on his face. I hope he stays still for long enough."

"Don't worry, he's a lazy thing, so he'll probably be asleep for ages unless he smells food," commented Alessio drily.

Alessio sat on a free sun lounger and just watched me while I drew, and for once I didn't mind his eyes on me.

ALESSIO

Since I had started taking Cate for a run every morning, I had begun to see a bit more light behind her hazel eyes.

And today, while I had been watching her draw, I had enjoyed the look of peace on her face and had allowed that peace to filter through to me. I just wanted her to be happy while she was here, while she was with me.

I still found it hard to believe that I had fallen for this girl. I had reached the age of twenty-six and never been in love before now. I had believed that in our violent world, the fewer people I was close to, the simpler things would be for me. Until now, I had let in no one except for my closest family, but Cate had torn down that barrier for me, making me want to get close to her and show her my love.

Juliana had once told me that falling in love could also make you hurt, and now I understood what she meant.

I loved Cate, and it hurt me to see her still sometimes battling her feelings for me.

***

The next day, I decided that taking Cate somewhere out of the villa might be good for her mood. “I thought I would take you into Positano if you’d like that? Today is Ferrogosto, the festival for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.”

“I’d love that,” said Cate, showing probably the most enthusiasm I’d seen in her since we’d arrived in Italy.

We took a car and I drove along the winding coastal roads until we came to Positano.

“This had always been one of the places in Italy I’ve wanted to visit,” Cate exclaimed as she took in the view. Positano was one of the main towns on the Amalfi Coast, its pastel-colored villas stacked on the almost-vertical cliffs and looking out over the Mediterranean Sea.

After parking the car, I took Cate’s hand and led her down the steep cobbles to the Church of Santa Adelina Assunta, one of Positano’s most iconic sights. It was a grand building situated right in the center of Positano, just a short distance from Marina Grande beach.

Cate looked up at the church’s majestic blue, yellow and green tiled dome, which looked stunning as it glinted in the strong Mediterranean sunlight.

“Would you like to look inside?”

She smiled up at me. “That would be great.”

Still grasping her hand, we walked into the beautiful white and gold interior of the church. “It’s still early, so the special services to celebrate the festival haven’t started yet.”

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” breathed Cate. “Do you know anything about its history?”

“The church was founded in the second half of the 10th century as a Benedictine Abbey,” I told her.

We walked along the central nave to the front of the church, and Cate gazed at the icon above the altar.

“In the 12th century, the icon of the Virgin was aboard a cargo ship sailing around the coast. The winds suddenly died, and the ship became stuck off the coast of Positano. According to the legend, the sailors heard a voice calling, ‘Posa, posa!’”

“That means, ‘Put me down, put me down’, right?” asked Cate.

“Yes. And when the captain of the ship understood that the icon wanted to go ashore at this location, the winds picked up again immediately. Then the ship docked so that the sailors could bring the icon into the town. This led to the people of Positano choosing the Virgin Mary as their patron saint, and the Archbishop of Amalfi dedicated this church in her honor.”

“You know a lot about this area.”

“It interests me. I love it here in Italy. When we have children, I plan to bring them here regularly on vacation so that they can understand their heritage.”

My comment about having children made a pink flush run up Cate’s cheeks.

I showed Cate a painting to the right of the altar. “This depicts the blessing of the icon.”

“I love learning all these things. Thank you for bringing me here.”

When we left the church, we stopped for coffee, sitting outside and watching the many people milling about.

Once we finished our coffee, I took Cate's hand again, liking that she wasn't fighting my touch or my company. "I know a good spot to watch the procession. The townspeople recreate the arrival of the Virgin Mary icon in the town."

"That sounds wonderful."

We spent the next few hours in Positano, enjoying the festivities and enjoying each other's company.

"It's so pretty," sighed Cate. "I've heard so much about how pretty the Amalfi Coast is, but nothing could have prepared me for the sheer beauty of this place."

That night when we went to bed, I watched Cate get into bed while I finished undressing.

I climbed under the covers. She was turned away from me, but I laid behind her and pulled her into my body.

She didn't resist my hold, so I gently stroked her hair and rubbed my face against it, smelling its subtle fragrance. I could never get enough of her smell or enough of her.

After a while, I kissed the back of her neck, savoring her warm and sweet skin.

When she didn't push me away, I turned her around in my arms and kissed her very softly. Just a whisper of a kiss, with my lips only just touching hers, teasing her with the pleasure I could give her if she would let me.

I felt her muscles soften against my hold. As my tongue explored her mouth, she tentatively met me with her own tongue.

I rose up on one elbow and gently pushed her back against her pillow.

Taking my weight on my arm, I kissed her a second time and felt her tremble as the back of my hand trailed down her breast. As I ran my fingers back up, I could feel that her nipple had tightened into an erect bud.

The warmth of her body spread to me through her thin nightgown. I pulled back from her lips and could see a look in her eyes that was a combination of thrill and fear.

“I’ll only do this if you want me to,” I said in a low voice.

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CHAPTER 29

ALESSIO

“I’ll only do this if you want me to.”

She hesitated, but then she swallowed and nodded.

I rested my arms on either side of her head, caging her in, and this time I kissed her savagely, just as I had wanted to do for a long time.

I pressed the full length of my body against hers. As my tongue played with her mouth, she was responding to me and enhancing the need within me.

I had held back for so long. And now I just wanted to totally consume her.

I brushed my fingers down the sides of her neck and slipped the straps of her nightgown down her shoulders, following the path of my hands with small, delicate kisses along her collarbone and above her breasts. As I

kissed her sensitive skin, I slid my hand inside her nightgown, groaning as my hands found her naked breasts.

I kissed the small scar that had been left on her shoulder by my knife—I regretted that I had ever had to cut her, that I had ever had to hurt her in that way.

However, I couldn't hold back now, and I tugged down her top, exposing her full breasts to me.

I molded both my hands around their plumpness, savoring the feel of her tits, before pinching both nipples and relishing the sensation of them growing into even stiffer peaks as she cried out at the sensation caused by my fingers.

She had closed her eyes tightly and I could tell by the flush in her cheeks that she was embarrassed. But I wouldn't let her do that—I wouldn't let her shut me out again.

"Open your eyes, Cate," I commanded. I stopped what I was doing until she obeyed me.

Although she opened her eyes, she tried to avoid my gaze.

"Look at me. I want you to watch what I am doing to your body, how much it turns me on, how much it makes me want you."

As she met my eyes, she tried to cover her naked breasts with her hands.

"Never hide your body from me again," I said as I firmly pulled her hands away from her body.

She instinctively tried to move her hands back to cover herself, but I caught them and held them tightly above her head.

Then I moved my mouth back to her nipples and worked each one with my tongue, enjoying the feel of the hard points in my mouth. And as I pulled back, I enjoyed seeing her lush nipples wet with my saliva.

I continued licking her breasts and sucking at her nipples until she was writhing with need and had forgotten her embarrassment.

“Every part of you is gorgeous. And I will want to see your body like this every night. You don’t know what you do to me and how much you arouse me.”

Her nightgown was pulled down to her midriff, but the bottom of it still covered the tops of her legs. I pushed the fabric up to reveal her creamy thighs, brushing my hands along the back of her knees and up toward the insides of her thighs, brushing against her swollen clit.

I skimmed my fingers over her panties, which clung damply to her sex. I lightly trailed my thumb up and down her cleft and she was so wet I could feel the dampness through the thin, flimsy fabric of her panties which I swiftly removed.

I moved back up her body and as I kissed her lips again. I removed my boxer briefs and pressed my whole body against her naked form. Her soft curves pushed against my hard muscles, making her seem vulnerable and breakable.

As I kissed her, I caressed her tits again. She was squirming against me with need. I knew what she wanted, but I made her wait. I would take her only when she was desperate for it.

Eventually, I moved my hands downward again, over her flat belly and between her legs. I moved my fingers along her naked pussy, and she let out a moan as she pressed herself against my fingers to increase the pressure.

But I withdrew my hand and moved it back to her breasts. I used my fingers to spread her wet pussy juices over her long nipples, making them gleam with her arousal before sucking her taste off her tits.

“Fuck, you taste so good. You taste like you want me—tell me that you want me.”

A needy sign escaped her lips, but she didn’t reply as I carried on kissing her, kneading her breasts, and pulling at her large nipples. “Tell me, Cate. Look at me and tell me.”

She looked at me and blushed. She was still embarrassed and wouldn’t tell me what she wanted.

“I won’t do it unless you ask me,” I warned.

“Please, Alessio, I want it…please do it.”

“Do what?” I wanted to hear her say the words aloud.

She hesitated but then she whispered, “I want you to fuck me.”

“You want me to fuck you how?”

“Alessio, please,” she whimpered. She reached down with her hand and tugged my erection toward her slit. The feeling of her hand on my dick was exquisite, but I tersely said, “No.”

I caught her wrists roughly and stretched her arms over her head, anchoring her hands against the headboard. “Tell me how you want me to fuck you.”

She looked at me with her lips slightly parted and her pupils dilated with lust. She was breathing deeply, almost panting with need.

When she didn’t reply, I said in a hard voice, “Tell me that you want my cock inside your pussy.”

No longer able to hold back and her desire overcoming her embarrassment, she cried out, “I want your cock in my pussy!”

Fuck, those words made my erection even bigger.

And I wasn’t going to go easy on her today.

I was going to take her how I had been wanting to take her since that first time I'd seen her at the bottom of the warehouse stairs, her torn nightgown teasing me with her naked breasts and taut nipples.

I transferred her wrists into one of my hands and kept them against the headboard. And then my other hand snaked down her body and pushed between her thighs, which she wantonly spread open for me.

I massaged my fingers up and down her wet slit, enjoying the feel of her swollen, slick folds. As I massaged her clit with my thumb, she moaned and tried to free her wrists from my hold. But I didn't let her go.

She was gyrating her hips against my hand. "Please, Alessio, I need you."

I would take her tonight, but first I would have to prepare her for my size.

I circled her clit and then she gasped as I penetrated her with one finger. Man, she was tight. I gave her a few moments to get used to the stretch inside her and continued kissing her lips and neck.

And as I felt her relax, I started to pump that finger in and out of her vagina. She was so wet and I could tell she really wanted me. I continued moving my finger in and out of her, stimulating her inner muscles.

Then, while I was sucking her stiff nipples with her head arched back, I withdrew my finger and instead plunged two thick fingers inside her.

This time, she took a sharp inhale of breath.

"It's okay, I'm just getting you ready for my cock. My fingers will expand your pussy so that you will be able to take me more quickly than last time."

Last time I had penetrated her very slowly, inch by inch, but today I wanted to thrust my whole cock inside her in one go. And this time I was going to ensure that she orgasmed with my dick inside her.

She took a little longer to get used to two fingers. However, by simultaneously using my thumb on her clit, she began to let go of her tension and enjoy the sensation.

Once she was used to two fingers, I knew that due to my size, I needed to prepare her with one more finger. On the next thrust, I added a third finger to imitate my girth.

This time, when I penetrated her with three fingers, she cried out and buried her face into my neck. “It’s okay. I’ve got you, cara.”

She found it harder with three fingers inside her and tensed up. “Try not to fight it—just concentrate on the good sensations.”

I knew she was probably remembering some of the pain of her first time having sex and that was contributing to her tightness and tense muscles. “It will be different this time because your hymen is already torn, so there won’t be the pain of that this time. Once you adjust to my size, the pleasure will come.”

But I could see that she was not going to relax.

“You’re going to enjoy this,” I murmured. Although I knew that the pleasure factor wasn’t what she had doubts about—it was the pregnancy issue she was concerned about. She was tense because she knew I wasn’t going to use a condom and she no longer was taking her birth control.

I moved up her body and licked her breasts at the same time as moving my three fingers in and out of her vagina. With my free hand, I pushed her thighs wider apart and feasted my eyes on the sight.

Fuck, I couldn’t wait to replace my fingers and instead watch my dick disappearing into her tightness.

By now, her pussy juices were smeared all the way from her clit to her ass. Her ass was gorgeous, and I knew I would take her tightest hole one

day soon—I owned every part of her now.

After gazing at her spread legs and the sheen of her delicious juices, I could no longer resist and I latched my lips around her hard clit, eliciting a throaty moan from her as I sent jolts of pleasure through her entire sex.

I remembered how much she had enjoyed me eating her pussy last time, and it seemed that this was what I needed to do to distract her so that she could relax and forget about the issue of no condom.

As I sucked on her clit, I felt her inner channel pulling in my fingers and I knew that she was now ready to take all of me. I withdrew my fingers and quickly moved up her body.

I held her thighs apart with my legs. And looking directly into her wide hazel eyes, I thrust the whole length of my erection into her in one hard penetration.

She gave a small cry, but I didn't let up—I knew her pussy was ready to take all of me and give me pleasure.

I withdrew my cock nearly the whole way before abruptly thrusting it back into her, and I saw a hint of pleasure in her eyes as my thickness massaged that sweet spot inside her.

I set a hard, relentless pace, plunging my dick in and out of her without mercy. When she tried to close her eyes, I fisted her hair. "Open your eyes. I want to look at you each time I penetrate your pussy. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." She nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on my face, and I could see her pupils were dilated with desire.

With each thrust, I let out a groan as I enjoyed the pressure around my cock.

I intensified my thrusts, and each penetration now made my balls rub against her sex. Her cries were becoming higher in pitch. And I knew that I wanted to make her come on my cock—I wanted her to recognize the pleasure I could give her if she'd let me.

I angled my hips to hit her front wall repeatedly until I felt her muscles starting to quiver.

"Please, Alessio, please…"

"Do you want to come?" I asked.

"Yes, please let me come."

"Who owns your pussy?"

"W-what?"

"I said, who owns your pussy?" I demanded.

"You do, Alessio, you do. Please take it, please take it with your cock…"

And her words made me abandon the last threads of restraint and I savagely plunged into her, ignoring everything except bringing our bodies to orgasm.

"Come now, Cate! I want to feel your pussy quivering as you come on my cock—I want to feel your tight muscles squeezing every last drop of cum out of me," I growled.

I pushed her over the edge, and she let out a succession of screams as the waves of orgasm hurtled through her entire core.

As her vagina spasmed and squeezed around me, my huge cock was fighting to expand in her channel as I reached my own climax.

"Fuck, Cate, you've got the tightest pussy I've ever had." I could hold back no longer and groaned hard again and again as my cum spurted out, and I pumped it all into her, marking her insides with my seed and making her mine.

I slumped on top of her, careful to support most of my weight on my arms. My chest and back were slick with sweat, and I could see a sheen of perspiration between her breasts and along her collarbone. “Fuck Cate, you’ll be the death of me,” I said, as I got my breath back.

I gently withdrew, and she winced slightly as my girth pulled out of her. I went to the bathroom and dampened a washcloth before returning to the bedroom.

She had closed her thighs, but I pushed them apart gently with my hands and cleaned her. After I was satisfied, I pressed a kiss to her clit.

“No, please, it’s too sensitive,” she begged as she tried to squeeze her thighs shut.

I chuckled. “I can wait an hour or so.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “An hour? You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“Yes, I am kidding. But you should know that having you next to me in bed, it’s going to be very difficult to resist you. Especially now I know you enjoy it as much as me.”

She blushed at my words.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You’ll get used to this—I want to have you every morning and every night. I love you, and you’re sexy as hell.” I pulled her onto my chest and wrapped her in my arms, slowly stroking her hair.

We probably should have gotten up and showered. But her skin smelled of sex mingled with her own sweet fragrance, and I didn’t want to wash that away just yet. I wanted to keep her like this until morning.

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CHAPTER 30

CATE

When I woke, I blushed when I thought about last night and about my reaction to Alessio.

But the truth was that I'd wanted what had happened.

I had wanted him.

Was that so wrong now that he was my husband?

I was beginning to question my resistance to him and beginning to let myself go to him.

I was past being angry about the implant. I'd always wanted babies, and although I hated his actions regarding the implant, I got the feeling that it was going to be long battle to make him change his ways. He was a Made Man, and he was used to controlling people and have them do exactly as he ordered.

I wasn’t going to be a pushover, though. If things were going to work between us, and if we were going to raise children together, then this had to be an equal partnership where he respected me and my opinions.

That morning, we went for our usual run, and it was easy to talk to him as I felt relaxed in his company after all the time we’d spent together recently. My feelings toward him were definitely softening.

After lunch, I was in the kitchen getting a coffee and thinking about all this when Camillo walked in.

He looked at me and blurted out, “Can you cook?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you able to cook dinner and stuff like that?”

“Is this your chauvinistic way of telling me that now I’m Alessio’s wife, I should be cooking dinner every night?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that Marco and Alessio normally do all the cooking for the family. But since we’ve been here, they’ve been busy with sorting out this whole mess with the drugs and FBI. And I can’t cook. Which means that Juliana always ends up offering to make dinner and we have to eat total shit every night. *And* pretend to enjoy it so as not to offend her or Marco. I’m just wondering whether you can cook, and then maybe you could take over some of the cooking and we could all not get killed by food poisoning.”

I wasn’t about to say it out loud, but I knew what he meant about Juliana’s cooking. It was pretty awful.

“I haven’t really cooked much in the past. My grandmother always insisted on doing all the cooking. But like a good Italian Nonna, she made sure that she taught me how to cook a few things. She was worried that I wouldn’t catch a good husband if I didn’t know how to cook.”

Camillo chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds like an Italian grandmother—spending all her time preoccupied with either food or how to marry off her grandchildren.”

I grinned, and I thought that this was probably the first real conversation I’d had with him. “I guess I could try to cook some of the things my grandmother showed me, although I don’t know how well it would turn out,” I said slowly.

“I can help you,” said Camillo eagerly, “but you’ll need to tell me what to do.”

“And Juliana can help as well,” I added.

“No way. Don’t let her near the kitchen again.”

“I don’t want to offend her—the kitchen is her territory.”

I knew that Camillo wasn’t exactly full of tact, so I’d have to be careful about what we said in front of her when we offered to make dinner.

I thought about what I could cook. “How about we make something simple tonight, like pasta and meatballs?”

“That sounds great. I love meatballs—well, I did until Juliana started cooking them.”

I looked in the fridge. “We’ll need to get some groceries. I think one of the problems is that Juliana never has all the right ingredients and just throws together whatever is in the fridge.”

“I can take you to the store and help you carry the bags and stuff.”

“Won’t your boss be displeased if you let me out of his prison?”

“Alessio won’t mind if you’re with me. As long as he knows you’re safe, then he’ll be happy,” replied Camillo, ignoring my sarcasm.

I felt myself perking up at the thought of leaving the villa for a while. It was overwhelming being around everyone all the time and having Alessio

always watching me so closely. I couldn't think straight when he was around me and I knew that despite my efforts to the contrary, I was starting to lose part of myself to him.

Later that day Camillo drove me to the grocery store which was located in a busy shopping area.

We bought all the ingredients we needed—some minced meat, herbs, fresh tomatoes, onions, pasta, and a few other things. When we were paying, I realized I had forgotten garlic. "We need garlic as well—I'll just go grab some while you pay."

As I returned to the fresh produce area without Camillo, I noticed there was a fire exit door propped open to catch a breeze. As it was a fire exit, the door could be opened from the inside without a key. And it probably wasn't alarmed, or the alarm would be sounding now.

This was exactly the sort of escape route I'd been hoping for since Alessio had brought me to Italy.

But things were different now. I was starting to see the possibility of a future with this man. I just had to find a way to be able to trust him. I needed to try and move past everything that had happened between us previously.

I picked up the garlic I needed and hurried back to the pay counter at the front of the store.

After paying and on our way back to the car, Camillo spotted a pet store and pointed it out to me. "Come on, Cate, let's get something for the dog."

I was puzzled. Camillo wasn't exactly the biggest fan of Mr. Fluffy, and I didn't see him as the sort of guy that would buy gifts for a dog. But I followed him into the pet store and watched him while he looked through the dog toys for something Mr. F might like.

Later when we started to make dinner, as expected, Juliana offered to help. “Hey guys, what are you cooking? I can help.”

“No, Juliana, that’s alright,” said Camillo quickly. “Mr. F looks like he wants to go for a walk.’

“He’s already been for both his walks today.”

“Yeah, but you know it was so hot earlier. It’s probably better to take him out at this sort of time, what with his big fur coat. I think he’s finding this heat a bit much. He’s not used to it.”

“Do you really think so?” Juliana frowned slightly as she considered what Camillo had said.

“Yeah, I do. Also, I got him this new toy today.” He pulled out what we had bought earlier. It was a frisbee decorated with pictures of bones. “I thought you and him might like to play with it together. And now that it’s a bit cooler, he can have a really good run around.”

“Have you poisoned it or something?” asked Juliana suspiciously.

“No, of course it’s not poisoned. Can’t a guy just do something nice for once? Look...” Camillo went to the door and threw the frisbee. Mr. Fluffy started barking and ran off to retrieve it. He picked it up in his mouth and ran back to us, wagging his tail madly and barking for Camillo to throw it again.

“Hey, that’s a really cool toy. He loves it,” exclaimed Juliana.

“Yeah, I knew he would. I’m pretty good with dogs, you know.”

I looked at Camillo, trying not to show my bewilderment at his sudden transformation into *the dog whisperer*.

Juliana took the frisbee from Mr. F’s mouth. “Maybe you’re right. It probably is a better time to take him for a walk when it’s a bit cooler. And now that he’s seen that frisbee, he’s not going to leave me alone until we

have a good play with it. Are you sure you don't need any help with dinner?"

"Yes, we're fine," Camillo said emphatically. "You go and play with Mr. F and we'll call you when dinner's ready."

"Okay and thanks for the gift, Camillo." Camillo looked surprised at the hug Juliana gave him.

She went out into the gardens with Mr. Fluffy, and I felt slightly bad about misleading her, but it was probably better than hurting her feelings by telling her that she was a lousy cook.

"Let's get started on Nonna's meatballs. She'll be impressed I'm trying to cook for my husband."

"They do say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," grinned Camillo.

"Yes, but I'm not trying to get anywhere near Alessio's heart. That is, if he even has one."

Camillo stared at me intently but said nothing. Even though he looked like a thug, I realized that he was probably more perceptive than I had given him credit for.

I got started on making the meatballs. "What do you need me to do?" asked Camillo, looking at the rest of the ingredients.

"What can you do?"

"I've never cooked anything in my life."

"How can you get to the age of eighteen and never have cooked anything?"

"Alessio and Marco do all the cooking and if I want a snack, I always manage to sweet-talk Debi or Danio into making it for me."

"You've got them all wrapped around your little finger."

“Hey, I’m a pretty likable guy, haven’t you noticed?”

I looked at him closely. Under all the muscles and tattoos, he was a bit like a big teddy bear whom his siblings didn’t have the heart to say no to. I’d already noticed that he was very good at doing his ‘wounded puppy dog eyes’ when he wanted something from his siblings.

“I am good with knives if that helps?”

“Of course you are.” I rolled my eyes at him. “You can chop up the onions and herbs and I’ll get some water on to boil for the pasta.” We made dinner together, and it was the most relaxed I’d felt in a while.

When we all sat down to dinner, Alessio and Marco complimented my cooking.

“The meatballs are slightly overdone,” I said critically. “And the tomato sauce isn’t as good as my grandmother’s. I’ll have to ask her for some tips when I speak to her next.” I knew, however, that the meal was infinitely better than anything Juliana had cooked so far.

“Cate, you’re a really good cook,” said Juliana, tucking into her meal. “Maybe I should ask your grandmother for some lessons?”

“Oh God, no more lessons,” murmured Camillo. “She’ll only come up with more recipes to torture us with.”

Marco cleared his throat loudly and shot a deadly look at Camillo. Luckily, Juliana hadn’t heard Camillo since she was talking to her dog as she fed him a piece of meatball.

“How about you tell us when you are going to learn to cook?” interrupted Marco in a terse tone. “I keep telling you that you need to learn so that you can pull your weight around the house, but so far you have done nothing about it.”

“Ah well, you know, I’ve been busy with work and stuff.”

“Like hell you have. Once we get back to the States, you’re going to start going to those cooking lessons with Juliana.”

“Oh man, you can’t be serious,” whined Camillo.

“I’m deadly serious, and I’m ordering you as your Capo.”

“You can’t pull rank like that,” huffed Camillo. “Your Capo rank doesn’t count when we’re talking about family matters and household chores.”

“You wanna bet?” warned Marco as he eyeballed his younger brother.

ALESSIO

After that night, Cate took over making dinner in the evenings.

Juliana still put lunch together, but that was normally cold meats, cheeses, olives, bread, and salads—things that didn’t need cooking as such. Cate seemed to enjoy cooking, and I liked that she was getting on with Camillo. She even seemed less afraid of Marco now. Camillo also surprised us all by taking it upon himself to drive Cate to the grocery store and help her with the cooking.

Cate sought me out at night too, and she seemed to draw comfort from us being together. She was always relaxed after sex and happy to lay in my arms. I had told her that I loved her several times; however, she always clammed up during these conversations.

One night, after making love to her slowly and gently, drawing her pleasure out for as long as possible, she lay in my arms with her head against my chest. I loved her like this—sated and tranquil. “I love you, cara.”

But, as usual, she gave no response. I looked down at her. “Why won’t you just tell me how you feel?”

“There’s nothing to say, Alessio. I can’t give you what you want.”

“Of course you can,” I said heatedly. “You’re just determined to make everything as difficult as possible.”

I was met by silence from her.

“Cate?”

“I’m tired. Can we go to sleep now, please?” Her voice had a pleading note, silently begging me not to go down this road again.

I had to restrain my frustration at her—I didn’t want to spoil the evening, but her emotional unresponsiveness was hard to deal with and it angered me.

There was clearly a physical desire between us, but she still didn’t completely trust me. That was understandable given the history of our relationship, and I knew I needed to find a way to get us past that so that she could finally start to trust me.

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The next day, I handed my cell phone to Cate when it was time for her daily phone call with her grandmother.

As usual, I sat by her side and made sure the speaker was on so that I could hear every word that was said.

Cate dialed the number, and her grandmother answered straightaway. Just like every other call, Cate soon moved on to asking her about her health.

“How are you feeling, Nonna?”

“Fine, Cate. I’m all fine.”

“Are you managing to keep your stress levels down? Remember, you’re supposed to get your blood pressure regularly checked by the doctor now.”

“As if I could forget with you reminding me every time you phone,” she chuckled.

“I just wish I was there with you,” she said wistfully. I knew that Cate was anxious about everything she said to her grandmother in case it caused more worry. Cate was especially careful not to tell her anything about her issues with me. Given how close Cate was to her grandmother, I was sure the old lady could sense my wife’s tension—although I hoped that she would put it down to Cate’s nervousness that the FBI might be listening to their conversation.

“Mom’s birthday is coming up,” she said quietly into the phone.

“I know. May God bless her soul. At least she is with your brother and not alone.”

Cate sighed. “She’ll be with my brother forever in that urn on the drawing room mantlepiece unless we get around to scattering her ashes. “I would have insisted on picking up the ashes to take with us if I’d know I was being dragged to Italy and—”

Cate yelped as I seized her wrist and snatched the phone from her, disconnecting the call.

“What are you…” Her voice trailed off as she watched rage spread across my entire being.

She’d just given away where we were.

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CHAPTER 31

ALESSIO

Without another word, I dragged Cate up to the bedroom.

I knew my actions were scaring her, but I couldn't think straight with the fury that burned through me.

Her arm shook as I grasped her wrist. I could feel her pulse beating too fast. "Is this your way to get back to the US?" I hissed. "By outing our location to the FBI so that there's no point in us hiding out here anymore?"

"No, Alessio, it just slipped out—"

"It just slipped out?" I gritted the words out.

"I didn't mean it…"

"Don't you realize how much danger you're putting yourself in?" I spat out. "The FBI wants to talk to you because they suspect you of being involved in the drug deals. Fuck, I've been trying to keep you safe from

them.” But she’d thrown my protection back in my face. I got that she hated me and would happily give me over to the FBI, but did she have no desire for self-preservation?

“I’m sorry.” She winced at my grip on her.

I let go of her arm, knowing that I was grasping her too tight.

I took out my cell phone and texted Marco to let him know what had just happened.

Then I looked back up at her. “You’ve just endangered all of us—not just you and me, but also my brothers,” I snarled. I could cope with me being in danger, but not her and not my brothers—my family meant the world to me, and anything that jeopardized their safety instantly made me see red.

She looked warily at me, like a deer facing its predator, her hazel eyes huge in her pale face. She knew that I wanted to punish her.

“Maybe the FBI wasn’t listening in,” she said desperately.

“Of course they were. They have so many wiretaps set up on our people that they can tell you what everyone in the Fratellanza had for breakfast this morning,” I snapped, irritated at her naivety.

“But wouldn’t Italy have been their first guess anyway?”

“They may have thought we were in Italy, but they had no proof until you let the cat out of the bag.”

“I’m sorry. It just came out—I was upset about my mom’s birthday coming up.” When I didn’t respond, she asked in a quiet voice, “What will happen now?”

“The FBI will try to get the Italian authorities to hand us over to them.”

“Will the Italians give us over to the FBI?” Alarm spread over her expression as she stood in the middle of the bedroom.

“Not if we can help it. We still know a lot of people here and have a lot of influence, but everything is now about ten times harder. Before the Italian authorities could deny that we were even here, but now the FBI has proof and will expect cooperation from their foreign counterparts.”

There was nothing she could say now to make things better—we both knew that.

“I want you naked,” I growled. “Take it off,” I said, nodding at her dress.

I waited for her to refuse me and was surprised to see her pupils dilate as she looked at me.

She pushed the straps of her sundress over her shoulders and let her dress slide to the floor.

I let out a hiss of breath as I walked over to her and grabbed the lace of her bra and panties, ripping them away from her body.

She gasped but didn’t stop me from exposing her tits and pussy.

My gaze trailed possessively over her bare skin. This time, I wasn’t going to take her slowly.

I shoved my fingers between her legs and as soon as I felt the slickness, I pushed her onto the bed and flipped her over onto her front. Roughly pushing her thighs apart, I sank into her cunt in one hard thrust.

She cried out as her back arched up and she pushed a hand against me, trying to slow me down.

But I only gave her a few moments before pulling my dick all the way out and plunging it savagely back into her, relishing the feel of her tightness —the feel of what was mine.

“This is mine,” I said as I pounded savagely into her. “Do you understand?”

She gasped each time I penetrated her, going so deep that my balls slammed against her clit with each thrust.

“Do. You. Understand?” I gritted out.

“Yes,” she cried. I could feel her getting even wetter as she approached her climax.

“Say it!” I demanded. I needed to hear her say the words.

“I’m yours, Alessio. I’m yours!”

I sped up my punishing rhythm, beads of sweat dripping down my chest, only holding off on my climax for as long as it took to push her over the edge. Her cries were becoming more labored, and then she gave a loud scream as she orgasmed.

The sounds coming from her and the spasms of her pussy triggered my own climax and I came hard, moaning as I spurted my seed into her, marking her as mine. “Fuck, I love you, Cate.”

As I held onto her, I knew that I loved her wholly and completely and that I wasn’t ever going to let her go.

CATE

After that day, there were no more phone calls to Nonna.

I might have been Alessio’s wife, but he was treating me like his captive, deciding which privileges to grant and deny me.

I got lonelier as the days went on now that I didn’t even have Nonna to talk to. And worse than that, since I couldn’t reassure myself by hearing Nonna’s voice every day, I kept worrying about her getting sick due to all the stress of the last couple of months.

Coming down to breakfast one day, I couldn't keep my upset in any longer. "What difference does it make whether or not I talk to Nonna? The FBI probably knows where we are now, so there's not much more harm I can do anyhow," I said plaintively. "Why are you still punishing me?"

"Because you keep on fighting me, cara. And giving up our location is just your latest ploy to keep on fighting me." Alessio turned around from where he was preparing breakfast. "I just don't get why you are so against our relationship. It's not as if you had some great life before me—you hardly ever went out apart from going to work, you had no real friends outside the Fratellanza and the only person you could confide in was your grandmother."

"You know nothing about what my life was like before I met you," I hissed.

"I know *everything* about your life, cara. I've done my homework. You need to move on with your life, and you can do that by letting me in and letting me love you instead of fighting me every step of the way."

"You think you're an expert on my life now because you had one of your men investigate me and pry into my affairs?" I snapped.

"They are my affairs now that you're my wife."

"I'm not a possession," I yelled at him before running upstairs and collapsing on the bed, letting my tears of frustration out.

***

As another week slowly went past, I knew I couldn't do this anymore.

It terrified me every time Alessio told me that he loved me.

Made Men were obsessive in everything they did. He kept trying to break down my resistance, trying to make me his.

I desperately needed to escape from him before he became any more possessive of me. I knew I had to get away from him before he sucked me in any further.

His need for me was like a savage hunger—and that scared me more than everything else he had done to me.

I didn't want to be part of his life in the criminal world, and the longer I stayed, the more Alessio was getting a hold over me. He kept trying to convince me that he loved me by giving me affection and attention, making me believe that he cared about me.

The tender side of himself that he had shown me was just a fantasy world. I had to remind myself that Alessio was like every other Made Man—underneath the surface lay a monster who needed violence to feed off and thrive, a monster who was trying to drag me into his lair so that he could make me vulnerable again and destroy me all over again.

His obsession with me wasn't bringing love into my life; it was bringing torment.

And after what had happened to my own family, I knew I could never go through something like that again.

That was why I had made a life for myself away from the Fratellanza, with my own job, apartment, and friends. My friends were there when I needed them and I was there for them as well, but at the same time I could keep them at arm's length, just far enough away that I wouldn't end up caring for them too much, in case they got snatched away from me like my mom and brother had.

Alessio was Consigliere of the Fratellanza and that was never going to change, and life in the Mafia would always lead back to pain and destruction. I couldn't do that again—I couldn't go through the sort of pain again that I'd suffered after the deaths of my mom and brother. I needed to live my life where I felt safe and where I couldn't be hurt again.

Our whole relationship was a disaster waiting to happen—he was a Made Man, a monster intent on killing and maiming, no matter the cost to those close to him. And I couldn't let myself become one of those people close to him. I had to protect myself and protect my heart. All I wanted was to go back to my old life and to be left alone.

I had been carefully thinking about what I would need to take with me to make my escape. Alessio had my passport, and I couldn't ask him for it, not even in a casual way—that would definitely arouse his suspicions, and I didn't want that.

I knew that if I was to get away from Alessio, I needed to get to a police station and then to the American Embassy.

I had figured out how to get away—via the fire exit at the grocery store. Now I just had to figure out the best time to do it.

When Camillo was too busy to take me grocery shopping, one of the soldiers would take me instead. Alessio and Marco had both made it clear that they had no interest in shopping for groceries and that they preferred that I go with either Camillo or a soldier.

I decided I would put my escape plan into action on a day I was taken shopping by a soldier instead of Camillo. When Camillo wasn't with me, I was given cash to pay for the groceries—that money would give me a way to pay for a cab to the nearest police station.

A cab would be quicker and less conspicuous than walking around asking for directions. I needed to get to the police station and in touch with the American Embassy before Alessio got in touch with the local police.

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A week later, Marco and Juliana went to a private hospital for their baby scan. Juliana was really excited; however, Marco was preoccupied with security for their hospital visit.

Alessio and Camillo were out visiting their connections about business matters and would be gone most of the day, so I was spending some time laying out by the pool. The only other people here were the soldiers guarding the villa, but they kept their distance, so for all intents and purposes, I was by myself for the first time since coming to Italy.

It was intense being around everyone all the time, and I really needed some time to myself. But it wasn't really relaxing today—because in a couple of hours I was going to put my escape plan into action.

After laying in the sun for an hour and a half, constantly checking the time on my watch, I went upstairs to get dressed to go grocery shopping with one of the soldiers. I had wanted to go as soon as the others had left the villa, but as I always went later in the day, I didn't want to arouse suspicion by altering my routine today.

As we drove to the store, I fidgeted with the shopping list in my hands, thinking about what I would need to do and attempting to focus my mind.

All too soon, we pulled up outside the store and made our way inside. Today I was supposed to cook *melanzane alla parmigiana*—aubergine with tomatoes and parmesan—served with roasted meats.

I had to go through the pretense of choosing the ingredients, conveniently forgetting to pick a few items. I told the soldier that Alessio had also asked me to do a general stock up and thus I picked up a huge number of various other household items such as cleaning products, washing powder, snacks, cereals, bottled drinks and anything else I could think of.

As we walked around the end of the store, my heart leapt as I saw that the fire door was again propped open to allow a breeze to come in on this hot, sultry day. I quickly flicked my gaze away from it, not wanting the soldier to notice my interest.

When we reached the pay counter, I told the soldier to start bagging up the groceries while I went back for the few items I had forgotten. I deliberately left my purse on the counter. The large number of groceries would take him a few minutes to pack, particularly since he was a man and probably unused to shopping.

I walked swiftly to the back of the store and instead of heading back to the fresh vegetable section, I turned and exited out of the fire door.

The door opened into a backyard, and I hastily let myself out of a gate and walked down a side alley back to the main road, removing my wedding and engagement rings and slipping them into my pocket to join the cash I had been given for the groceries.

Luck was by my side, and I managed to flag down a passing taxi. “Please could you take me to the nearest police station?” The driver gave me a funny look in the rearview mirror.

“I’m meeting my friend who works there.” He nodded, apparently satisfied, and he left me alone for the rest of the ride.

I sat back, trying not to appear on edge. Now that I had gotten away from the soldier, I knew he would realize after a few minutes that I had escaped.

I hoped he would take a few minutes looking for me and then he would ring Alessio who would probably drive into town himself to find me–and I prayed it would be only after those things that they would contact the police to tell them to keep a look out for me.

When we reached the police station, I paid off the driver and went inside the gloomy building.

“Excuse me, sir? I’m an American tourist and my belongings, purse, and passport have been stolen. I need to get to the American Embassy—can you help me please?”

I wished now that I spoke better Italian—I should have listened to Nonna and practiced it more at home—but I knew that given the rustiness of my mother tongue, it would be quicker if I spoke English right now.

The officer thankfully spoke English. “That is unfortunate, signorina. I am sorry to hear of your misfortune. May I take your name please?”

“It’s Sarah Parker.” I gave the officer a false name. No way in hell was I telling the Italian police that my name was Cate Marchiano—if I did, they would probably hand-deliver me back to my husband.

I knew my supposedly stolen purse and passport would make it believable to the police that I had no formal identification with me. And my as-American-as-apple-pie accent would convince them that I was indeed a tourist needing to get back to her home country via assistance from the American Embassy.

Once I was at the American Embassy, I would explain what had happened—that I had been brought to Italy against my will and that I needed to get back to the States.

And when I made it back to the States, I would disappear. I had the money left to me by my father. I would get a job somewhere where no one knew me and start a new life—a new life away from Made Men, death, and crime.

I would miss Nonna, but perhaps I could convince her to come with me? I would find out a way to stay in touch with her somehow.

All I needed was an hour or so. As soon as I was on my way to the American Embassy, that would give me a head-start and make it harder for Alessio to catch up with me. And once I was at the American Embassy, I would be safe from the Marchianos and the Fratellanza.

The officer showed me to a room and asked me to wait while he contacted the appropriate person at the embassy. There was a table and two chairs, but I was too anxious to sit down and instead paced the room.

I kept checking my watch, wondering how long it would take until I could be on my way to the embassy. A while later, the officer returned. “I have brought someone to see you.”

“Someone from the embassy?”

“No. It’s someone who has been looking for you.”

My blood ran cold. Alessio had found me.

I turned to look at the man behind the officer, the breath being sucked from my lungs as I saw his face.

It wasn’t Alessio.

But I recognized him.

He was the man that had taken me from my father’s house: Dmitri Petrov.

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CHAPTER 32

CATE

I screamed out.

“No one will hear you, Cate. Surely you didn’t think you could hide away from me forever?”

“Wh-What are you doing here?” I watched as the officer left us alone and closed the door behind him.

“I’ve been waiting to get you by yourself. Your husband always has his family or a soldier with you. Luckily for me, today you decided to ditch your security detail. And I’ve had a friend in the local police keeping an eye out for you.”

Oh God, Alessio had said the Russians were still furious about the drugs—they had lost millions of dollars through my father’s double-crossing and through the subsequent FBI investigation which shut down some of their

operations. Dmitri Petrov had escaped from the warehouse when Alessio had rescued me. But today he had come back for me.

“So, Cate, we didn’t get to finish our little conversation last time. You were going to tell me where your father hid the rest of the money he made from selling the drugs to my people.”

“I d-don’t know what you’re talking about...I had nothing to do with my father’s dealings.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe that. I’m not a fool.”

“I’m telling the truth.” Escaping Alessio had been supposed to make me feel safer, but I wished at this very moment that Alessio was here to protect me.

“Don’t you remember what I said last time about how I would get you to talk—by forcing you to your knees and making you gag on my hard cock.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, I swear.”

But I could tell Dmitri didn’t believe me. He walked toward me and with one hand pushed me to the hard ground while his other hand fisted my hair.

I tried to push back against his legs but he just laughed—he was too strong for me. I choked back a sob.

Dmitri began to unzip his pants as I carried on struggling.

His head flew up as the door swung open and there was the click of a gun safety catch being released.

My eyes followed the direction of the sound and I saw Alessio. He was here, and he had his gun pointed at Dmitri. “Let her go, Dmitri—now.”

Dmitri considered this for a moment before releasing my hair. He smirked. “She’s not my type anyway—too wholesome. I prefer more of a slut.”

Alessio’s eyes didn’t leave Dmitri. “Cate, come to me,” he instructed.

I didn’t hesitate. I wanted to get as far away from Dmitri as possible. Seeing him again brought back bad memories and made me feel scared and powerless. I needed to feel Alessio’s arms around me, his warm skin touching mine, and his voice whispering into my hair.

"How did you find me?"

"I have my ways," Alessio said cryptically.

As I hurried toward Alessio, Dmitri took his chance and swiftly raised his gun, aiming at Alessio.

Alessio reacted the moment he sensed movement from Dmitri. He fired his weapon, hitting Dmitri in the chest.

It all happened so quickly. I screamed as I saw Alessio fall to the ground, clutching his side.

At the same time, more soldiers arrived—Alessio had brought back-up with him.

I fell to my knees, crying out and pressing my hands to Alessio’s side. There was blood everywhere. It was seeping out of his body and out through my fingers.

I heard shouting all around me as more soldiers and police swarmed into the room and someone said something about a doctor.

But I had been here once before, next to a body shot by the Bratva, and I knew how this would end.

Alessio was trying to keep his eyes open, but he couldn’t say anything. I heard loud sobbing and then saw tears falling onto my hands, and I realized the sobs were coming from me.

I heard more voices around me, and I knew that they belonged to Marco and Juliana.

“Fuck!” shouted Marco. I expected him to start firing out orders, but instead he dropped to his knees next to me.

My blood-covered hands were clamped over Alessio’s wound and Marco pressed his hands down on top of mine as if two sets of hands could help save Alessio.

Surprisingly, Juliana was the only one that was able to think straight. “We need cloths—clean cloths or plastic bags or anything like that! Someone get some!” she yelled.

When an officer came back a minute later with clean cloths, she grabbed them from him.

“Move your hands—now!” she instructed Marco and me.

Marco and I pulled our hands away for a moment to let her put the cloth over Alessio’s wound, her hands shaking as she did so.

I looked up at Marco. His face was stricken. “Alessio, stay with us. You’ve got to stay with us.” And then I heard him whisper, “I need you, man. I’ve always needed you.”

Alessio’s dark eyes had been flickering open and shut, but he could no longer fight it and he slipped away from us.

“Marco?” I sobbed.

“He’s going to be okay,” Marco said harshly. “Look at me, Cate, he’s going to be okay—he has to be.”

Marco kicked into action as Capo. “A doctor coming here won’t be able to do anything,” Marco said abruptly. “We need to get him to a hospital right away.” He shouted to his soldiers, “Get a vehicle ready and help me carry him out!”

“Should we be moving him?” I asked, worried that we might worsen his injuries.

“We’ve got no choice,” Marco said tersely. “He needs medical attention now, otherwise he’ll bleed out.”

Why couldn’t we be like normal families? If we were, we could just call for an ambulance. But I knew we couldn’t risk that because as soon as we got the authorities involved, the cops would be crawling all over the Fratellanza.

“What if we don’t get to the hospital in time?” I cried.

“We have to.” But I could see from Marco’s expression that, despite his words, he had the same thought as me.

Alessio was unconscious now and didn’t make a sound when they lifted his body up and carried him out to the waiting SUV. Marco and I got into the back with him, my hands still pressing down on his wound, trying to stem the blood flow. Juliana followed in another SUV with more soldiers.

By now I was covered in blood. Although Alessio was the one shot, I felt like someone was twisting a knife in my gut.

The drive to the hospital felt like the longest drive I had ever been on. I looked across at Marco whose mouth was set in a grim line. There was anger in his eyes, but there was also something else behind his expression—it was a look of fear. Not something that I would have ever thought I would see in the eyes of the Capo of the Fratellanza.

And the fact that he was scared made me shudder. My mind was so numb with terror that I couldn’t even pray. All I could do was stare at the blood seeping through my fingers and wonder how much longer until I would no longer feel the warmth from Alessio’s body and no longer feel the life in his soul.

My back was drenched in cold sweat, and I shivered. All the blood was making me feel nauseous, but I couldn’t stop staring at my hands which

were covered with it, pressing tight to Alessio's wound, trying to keep the life in his body.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Marco cursed. I knew he felt as powerless as me.

"I'm sorry." My voice was quiet. "This whole mess is my father's fault. He's why the Russians are after us now."

"The Russians are a bunch of fuckers. If it wasn't this situation with your father, they would find some other reason to be at war with us." Marco's words were abrupt. But I knew that he was, in his own way, trying to let me know that he didn't blame me.

Marco looked back at his brother. "Fuck, Alessio, you've got to keep fighting. Don't give up. You've never given up on me before, so don't stop now—don't even think about it, man."

"Have you rung ahead to the hospital to let them know we're on our way?" shouted Marco to the soldiers in the front seats.

"Yes, boss. We've given them a rundown of the injury and an estimated time of arrival."

By the time we reached the hospital, I had lost all sense of time. It had only been around twenty minutes, but it felt like a lifetime. My body and mind felt like they were wading through a thick fog, and nothing seemed real anymore. I couldn't think about anything except keeping Alessio here with me.

As I looked up at the hospital, I was even more terrified because I knew Alessio would be taken from me and that I might not feel his warm skin under my fingers again. I wanted to hold on to this moment, the feel of him, for as long as possible. But as soon as we pulled in through the gates of the private hospital, the doors of the SUV were wrenched open before the vehicle had even come to a halt.

I tried to keep my hands over his wound. “I need to stay with him, he needs me to help him—”

“We’ve got it from here!” The doctors hauled Alessio’s lifeless body onto a gurney and rushed through the entrance. The doctors and nurses were speaking rapidly in Italian. I tried to keep up with them, but then I felt Marco’s hold pulling me back.

I struggled against him. “I need to stay with Alessio.”

“We have to let the doctors do their job now.” His voice was flat and full of defeat.

“But...what if...”

“Don’t even say it, don’t even think it,” Marco whispered as he pulled me into his embrace, and I let the hot, heavy tears pour out of me.

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CHAPTER 33

CATE

Marco, Juliana, and I all waited nervously in the waiting room. Juliana and I sat together while Marco paced furiously up and down the room and demanded I tell him again exactly what had happened and what Dmitri had said.

“At least that fucker is dead now,” said Marco about Dmitri. “If he wasn’t, I would be torturing him to death in the most painful way possible after what he’s done to my brother.”

We sat and waited for what felt like an eternity.

Everyone was distracted, and this was the perfect opportunity for me to slip away again.

Except that I didn’t want to anymore.

I’d thought that getting away from Alessio would make me feel safer. But nothing could have been further from the truth. How scared I’d been with Dmitri had been in complete contrast with how Alessio had made me feel over the last few weeks—cared for, protected, cherished, and loved.

He had given me the security and love I’d been yearning for all these years since my mom and brother had died.

I’d spent years telling myself that it was the Mafia world which was responsible for all my problems and that all Made Men were the same—violent and brutal.

But Alessio had shown me a different side and a different sort of man—the sort I had fallen deeply for.

I could either keep running from the pain of my past, or I could try to heal those wounds with the love of a man who would do anything for me, including risking his own life.

He had put his life on the line for me. And now, if I wanted to be with him, I would have to trust him with my life and let him in and let him help me heal—that is, if he ever forgave me for betraying his love by running away from. Oh God, I had made a complete mess of everything.

After a few hours, Marco said, “Juliana, you should go home to the villa. The stress isn’t good for your pregnancy and your blood pressure is already too high.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I know if Alessio is going to be alright. Going home is not going to stop me from worrying.” The stubborn tone of her voice made it clear that she wasn’t leaving.

Eventually, the doctor who operated on Alessio came out to speak to us. I could see he was nervous around Marco—he knew exactly who Marco was and what he would do to him if he let Alessio die.

ALESSIO

My head felt fuzzy and the black in front of my eyes started to lighten. My mouth felt as dry as a desert and there was a dull ache in my abdomen. I tried to groan, but my throat was too dry to even manage that. Maybe I should just go back to sleep, I thought.

“He’s awake.” I heard a stranger’s voice. “He’s regained consciousness.”

Regained consciousness? That must mean I had blacked out or something. I fought the drowsy feeling overcoming me and forced my eyes open.

“It’s okay. You’re in a hospital.” A man dressed in scrubs was standing at my side. “How are you feeling?”

I tried to speak but only managed a croak. He held a cup of water to me, and I drank gratefully from the straw.

The water helped to revive my senses, and I looked past the doctor to see Marco standing with Cate. “You look like shit, Capo,” I said in a low, husky voice.

“We must match then,” Marco grinned. But I could tell in that grin was also a huge amount of relief.

“We had to operate to remove the bullet and repair the internal damage,” the doctor continued. “You’re lucky they got you here when they did because you wouldn’t have survived much longer given the extent of internal damage and the amount of blood loss you suffered.”

“When can I get out of here?” I tried to make my voice strong despite the pain I was in.

“Right now, we just need to take each day as it comes and monitor the healing and keep an eye out for any signs of infection or complications. How is the pain?”

“It’s fine. I can manage.”

“Get him some more pain relief,” ordered Marco.

“I don’t need it. For fuck’s sake, I don’t want to be all drugged up and I want to get out of here.”

“I’m Capo and you’ll follow my orders.” At that moment, Marco’s cell phone rang, and he excused himself while the doctor went to fetch some more painkillers.

Only Cate was left in the room with me. She had stayed silent until now, but she could no longer hold back the tears which started to run down her pale cheeks.

“Hey, come here,” I said, awkwardly holding my arm toward her. She rushed over and hugged herself to my side. “It’s okay. I’m okay now. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“I thought you were going to die…there was so much blood. We couldn’t stop the blood loss. I thought I wouldn’t see you again.”

Right then, the door opened, and Juliana walked in. “Marco told me that you were awake! You had us worried.” I watched as behind her trotted in Mr. Fluffy.

“You know that dogs aren’t allowed in hospitals, right?” I grumbled, my pain making me cranky.

“The doctor said something like that to us until Marco gave him one of his looks and reached for his weapon.”

Marco came back in at that moment. “Juliana needs to keep her blood pressure down, and she was worried about leaving Mr. F at the villa after

that shitshow today."

Juliana nodded. "Mr. Fluffy would worry about you. He saw you after you'd been shot, and he saw all the blood." Mr. F put his front paws on the side of my bed and whined before nuzzling his wet snout into my hand.

I was too tired and in too much pain to worry about him messing up my bedsheets, so I just patted him on the head, and he wagged his tail at me. At that moment, I could kind of see Juliana's point about how the dog helped take some stress away.

Then I thought to myself, I must be high on painkillers to be thinking such mushy thoughts about the dog.

I tried to shift my body again, but the stitches pulled at my side, making me grunt in pain. The doctor returned and added something to my IV line. "I told you, I don't want more painkillers."

"You need to rest." Cate's voice was quiet. "We all need you well again and back with us."

She said *with us*. I wondered if she meant *with her*, but I didn't have the chance to ask. As the meds took over and dragged me back into drowsiness, something didn't feel right, but I didn't have the energy right now to work it out.

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When I came around later, I saw that Cate was asleep in the chair next to me. Her arms were propped on the side of my bed, and she rested her head on top of them. On the other side of my bed sat Marco.

“You’re awake,” said Marco.

“I can see nothing gets past you. Why didn’t you go home?”

“Cate refused to go back to the villa, so I stayed here with her. I sent Juliana back with some soldiers to get some rest. You’ve got a pretty loyal girl here, you know? She hasn’t left your side since you arrived here.”

“How long was I out for?”

“After they finished operating, you were unconscious for a further twenty-four hours.”

“Shit.”

“Exactly. You had me really worried there. Don’t do that again, man.”

I winced as pain stabbed at my side. “Don’t worry, I don’t plan on doing this again anytime soon.”

“The doctor says you’ll be here for a few days yet.”

“The sooner I’m out of this place, the better. Hospitals give me the creeps.” Hospitals usually meant that we were waiting for news about fellow Fratellanza members hurt in the course of our business, and they had to be pretty seriously injured if Dr. Cotrone couldn’t patch them up and instead sent them to the hospital.

“I know what you mean. I hated it when we had to come here yesterday for Juliana’s scan. I didn’t expect to be back here so soon again.”

“Hey, how did the scan go?” I remembered now that I hadn’t had a chance to ask him about it.

“Yeah, it’s all looking good.” he grinned. “We’re having a boy.”

“That’s awesome, congratulations to you both.”

“Thanks, man. I wouldn’t have minded a boy or a girl, although I know that boys can be more of a handful. I just hope he doesn’t bring us grief like Camillo and Danio.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to be a dad.”

“Me neither. I never thought I would be married, happy, and looking forward to having kids.”

“You’ll make a great dad, especially after all the practice we had with bringing up Camillo, Danio, and Debi.”

“We had to grow up pretty fast,” Marco recalled.

“Definitely, what with looking after them and you taking over as Capo back then. Now it’s your time to enjoy your wife and baby. At least having all our siblings living with us means that there’ll be plenty of babysitters.”

Marco chuckled. “There has to be some advantage to having Camillo living with us.”

“Anyway, I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me. You should get home to Juliana.”

“I might just go back and check on her. I’ll catch some shut-eye, and then head back here later.”

“Take Cate with you.” I looked across at her sleeping form.

“She won’t come. I’ve already tried, believe me, but she refuses to leave your side.”

“I’ll try to persuade her once she wakes up. She’s pretty out of it right now.” Cate hadn’t stirred even while we spoke around her.

“Yeah, she hardly slept a wink until you regained consciousness. That one’s a keeper. I have to admit, I wasn’t sure at the start when we thought that perhaps she was involved with her father’s dealings, but I can tell she loves you.”

I frowned. Again, I got the sense that something didn’t feel right about all this. I wasn’t used to having to give in to pain or drowsiness, and both these

things were dulling my senses and making it hard to think completely straight.

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Later that day, after finishing my meal, the nurse brought me some more painkillers. I refused to take them. “No more painkillers. They knock me out and I need to be able to think straight.”

“You don’t need to be able to do anything while you’re in here,” admonished Cate. “You’re to rest. That’s doctor’s orders and also Marco’s orders.”

“We’ll see about that. I’m hoping to head home today.”

“You make a really lousy patient, do you know that?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” The pain and my frustration about being stuck here was making me irritable.

“Apart from the hole in your side and the fact that you can’t move without groaning in pain.”

“I’m used to pain. It comes with the job.”

“You don’t need to suffer—that’s what painkillers are for.”

“Look, Cate, you should head home now. You’ve been here long enough, and as I said, I hope I’ll be home soon.”

“Marco said he would be heading back here later to talk to the doctor and see how you’re doing, so when he arrives, I’ll go home and grab a shower and maybe a bit of sleep.”

Marco came back to the hospital about an hour later, and finally Cate headed back to the villa.

However, she was back at the hospital and by my side later that day. “What are you doing back here so soon? You could have only had about three hours sleep.” She had obviously showered and changed her clothes, but she still looked exhausted.

“Someone’s got to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t overdo it.”

“That someone doesn’t need to be you.” I didn’t know why I was saying these words to her.

“Well, it is me, so you better get used to it.”

She sat back down in the chair next to my bed and emptied a bag of grapes, magazines, and chocolate.

“I need my phone,” I said to Cate.

“Marco said you’re not allowed your phone until you’re better.”

“For crying out loud, I’m a grown man and I’m hardly going to overexert myself looking at a few damn emails.”

Cate, however, wouldn’t budge on this. So instead I flicked through the TV channels, letting my frustration simmer.

***

I woke up from a nap a bit later to find a nurse in the room with me. “Your wife has just gone to get a coffee and something to eat. She’ll be back soon.” I didn’t say anything to the nurse, who was fussing around my room and trying to tidy up.

After the nurse left, I sat and thought. There was nothing else to do in this place, especially as I didn't have my phone and couldn't work. Having time to think wasn't a luxury I usually had and going over in my mind what had happened, I realized that what didn't feel right anymore was having Cate here.

The thought hit me like a ton of bricks.

That was what had been causing me to feel uneasy since I had come around after my surgery.

She wasn't part of this life. And it wasn't fair of me to keep her in it.

She'd made herself a life away from the Fratellanza, and she'd done that for a reason—for her safety and for her happiness.

It had taken all this happening to make me realize that I had been a fool to think this could ever work.

I picked up the landline phone next to my bed—at least Marco hadn't thought to have the phone removed from my room.

Without thinking any more about it, I did what I knew I had to do and dialed the number of the lawyer who acted for the Marchiano family.

After talking to the lawyer and ending the call, I sat in bed thinking things over until Cate returned to my room.

"The doctor said he will discharge you later on the proviso that you have complete bed rest back at the villa. He has given me all your meds and the schedule of when you need to take them. I'll remind you when it's time for you to take your next dose."

"You don't need to do that. It's not your job," I said in an emotionless voice.

"Of course it's my job. I'm your wife." Cate spoke in a matter-of-fact voice.

Christ, I had been fighting Cate over these last few weeks to get her to accept her place as my wife. She had battled me over this at every turn and now that I was ready to set her free, she was suddenly happy to be called my wife and act like one—was she kidding me?

“You don’t have to be my wife for much longer.” My voice was hard and flat.

Cate stilled and fixed her wary gaze on me. “What do you mean?”

“I know that you want this marriage annulled, and I’ve phoned our family lawyer to set it in motion.”

Cate blinked rapidly. “I don’t understand…”

“You said that you didn’t want to be part of this life, that you didn’t want to be part of the Fratellanza anymore, that you had already lost too many people to it. It shouldn’t have taken something like this happening for me to realize that you shouldn’t have to go through it again. The doctor tells me that it was pretty touch and go, that my heart stopped during surgery and that they weren’t sure if I’d regain consciousness afterward.”

Cate’s brow had furrowed. “But you’re okay now and everything’s okay—the doctor said so.”

“But that’s today. Tomorrow there’ll be another battle, another war with the Bratva or the Cartels or someone else. You’ll always be looking over your shoulder, wondering who’s coming to get me next or coming to get you. That’s not any sort of life for you. I know you want to have a normal life away from the Fratellanza, and I’m granting you that. You never even agreed to this marriage in the first place. I should have asked you, not your father—it should have been you who signed that engagement contract. It should have been you who made the decision. I forced the marriage on you.”

“But I did make that decision.”

“It wasn’t your decision. You said it yourself back then, it was a forced marriage—forced by me. And that was wrong, so I’m letting you go now.”

“Maybe back then I didn’t make the decision to be your wife, but eventually I have. I want to be with you. Because I care about you… because I love you.”

I was stunned into momentary silence. “You love me?” My voice was harsh, disbelieving.

“Yes, I love you. I’ve been fighting my feelings for you for so long now, and it took you coming to save me and getting shot for me to finally be able to admit the truth to myself and to you.”

Cate telling me that she loved me nearly floored me, but having come this far, I couldn’t stop now. “But don’t you see, Cate, loving me is just going to lead to more misery for you?” My voice was hard. “I don’t know how long any of us in the Fratellanza have or when our nine lives are going to run out. But I won’t always be here for you.”

Cate’s eyes glittered with unshed emotion. “Don’t say that! Of course, you’ll always be here with me. You just got a reminder of your mortality, that’s all. But, as you said, you’ve got nine lives.”

“I’ve probably used up more than those nine lives and I reckon I’m already living on borrowed time.” I ran my hand through my hair. “You’ve been right all along, Cate—I can’t keep you safe or keep you from being hurt again. I was nearly killed, and it could have been you who was shot. I don’t want that for you. I’m letting you go, Cate.”

“You don’t understand, Alessio.” She slipped her small hand into my much larger one. “I never felt safe around my father. He put business and money before family. After my mom and brother died, I never felt safe

around him again. This man I'd idolized as a child had let me down in such a terrible way. He let down my mom, my brother, and my family. But when I'm with you, it's the safest I've ever felt because I love you and because I know you'll never let me down like my father did. Alessio, you're smart, you're brave. Nothing's going to happen to you. There's no one else I want to be with—there's no other life I want."

I looked at her intently. "Even though I could never leave the Fratellanza?"

"Yes, even though you could never leave the Fratellanza. They're your family. They're my family now. It's taken me a while to come around to the idea of us being together. I didn't want to fall in love with you." Her voice was quiet yet strong. "I didn't want to be tied to this life and I think I knew, deep down, that loving you would mean staying part of the Fratellanza."

"We will both always have the Fratellanza as an integral part of our daily lives—would that be okay with you?"

"It has to be okay." Her hazel eyes didn't leave my gaze. "Because I can't live without you, and the Fratellanza is part of you."

"You don't know what you're saying, Cate. This happening has brought home to me just how fragile our life is—that it can be taken away at any moment."

She put her free hand up against my chest. "And that's why we need love because love isn't fragile. Love is eternal. Love will keep you anchored in this world—it gives you something to stay alive for."

"I can't promise that I'll always stay alive." As I spoke, I tightened my grip around her hand as if emphasizing my strength to her, my determination to stay alive for her.

"But you can promise that you'll always love me…"

“I love you now and I’ll love you forever. Nothing can ever change that. When did you become so wise, Cate?”

“Maybe I’ve always been a wise one. I had to grow up too quickly, the same as you did. It’s just taken me a long while to understand that wisdom and know what to do with it. I’ve spent too many of these past years trying to run from my memories.”

“And you don’t want to run anymore?”

“No, I don’t want to run. I’m happy right here with you.”

“You’re happy? I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“Yes, I’m happy. And I’ll be saying it a lot more from now on.”

My lips curve into a grin. “Good. Now go lock that door, cara, and come here and let me show you how much I love you.”

Cate blushed but did as she was told. She walked over to the door and turned the lock. Slowly, she turned back to me and started to unbutton her shirt as she walked back to me.

I pulled my t-shirt over my head, and as she tugged down her jeans, I started to make room for her on the bed next to me, but she pushed me onto my back and swung her leg over my torso instead. I growled at her.

“No, you’re to rest, so that means you should just lie back and let me be on top.”

Although I wanted to exert my dominance over her, I had to admit to myself that it was sexy as hell seeing her straddle me. I reached up behind her and undid the clasp of her bra, allowing her breasts to tumble out of their confines. “Christ, I can never get enough of your tits, Cate.”

Cate bent forward, trailing kisses over my torso, careful to avoid my injury. It was still painful, but nothing was going to stop me fucking my wife right now, no matter how bad the pain was.

She rubbed her panty-clad pussy over my bare dick, making me ache with need. I ripped her panties off her.

“Alessio, I don’t have any more panties here with me!”

“I don’t care,” I said in a harsh voice, pushing two fingers into her tight channel and finding her copiously wet for me already. Guiding her hips over me, I eased her onto my rod, groaning as she sank her tightness around me. “Fuck, Cate, you don’t know how much I want you right now.”

I put my hands on her hips and guided her into a delicious rhythm as she bounced up and down on my dick, her breasts jiggling enticingly with each movement she made.

Even though she was on top, that didn’t stop me from driving my hardness up inside her each time she pushed her hips down onto my cock, deepening my invasion of her pussy and my consumption of her. I could never get enough of this woman.

I moved one hand to her back and shoved her forward so that I could capture her tits in my mouth and suck on her hard nipples at the same time I was inside her. I bit down lightly on a rosy nub, making her gasp, before soothing it with my tongue and then transferring my attention to her other nipple.

She was mewling like a kitten now and I used my hands to thrust her down harder on my cock, until she could hold on no longer and came with a small cry, consciously trying to be as quiet as possible given our location in a hospital.

Her spasming channel pushed me over the edge at the same time, making me groan loudly as I spurted my seed deep inside her and coated her insides with my slick cum, continuing to thrust my hips upwards to wring every last drop out of my dick.

“Shhh!” admonished Cate. “The nurses and doctors might come to check if you are alright and they will know exactly what we’re doing if they try the door and find it locked,” exclaimed Cate.

“I don’t care. I’m Consigliere of the Fratellanza, and you’re my wife, which means we can do whatever the hell we want from now on. And the only thing I want right now is you,” I said, as I held her tight and pressed my lips against hers.

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EPILOGUE

CATE

After Alessio was discharged from the hospital, it was another month until the situation with the FBI got resolved and we were able to return to the States.

When we first arrived in Italy, I'd longed to be able to return to the States. That last month, however, had turned out to be a sort of belated honeymoon. And during that time, I had finally let my guard down and let myself love Alessio how my heart wanted me to.

One morning, as I got dressed after taking a shower, Alessio came up with a package.

"For you," he said, handing it to me.

"What is it?" I asked as I opened the well-padded packaging.

“It’s your mom’s and brother’s ashes,” he said quietly. “I know how much you want to scatter their ashes in Italy, just like your mom always wished.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes as I held the urn in my hands. “Thank you,” I whispered. The fact that he would think to do this when all those other problems were still going on with the FBI really brought home to me how much he loved me.

My father had never made the time to come to Italy to scatter the ashes—he had always put work and money before his family. But I knew now that Alessio wasn’t the same and that I could trust him and let myself love him without fear of the consequences.

Later that day, I scattered the ashes at sunset with Alessio at my side. I chose to do it at the villa’s private beach. It was a serene place, and I thought that my mom and brother would like being by the sea.

“My mom and brother can finally be at peace,” I murmured.

Alessio held me against his chest as we watched the sun dip behind the horizon. “And hopefully you can be too.”

I understood now that Alessio was trying to help me move on in my life and get past the bad stuff that had happened—and that he was doing it because he cared about me.

I looked up at the man I loved. “Nothing will ever bring back my mom or brother. But it’s time to put those bad memories away and instead focus on my good memories of them.” And listening to the gentle waves lapping at the shore, I felt contentment for the first time in a long while.

ALESSIO

Before we returned back to the States, Anni and Lorenzo came over to Italy for a week, bringing with them their own children, Clara and Clemente, as well as Danio and Debi.

Marco and I were eternally grateful to our cousin for looking after our younger brother and sister while we'd been forced to lay low in Italy. You couldn't trust many people in this world, but Lorenzo was like a brother to us.

On our last night in Italy, we all dined together in one of our favorite restaurants in Positano.

Cate and I were meeting the others at the restaurant. I instructed the soldier driving us to drop us off at the top of the town so that we could enjoy the stroll down the steep cobbled streets. Taking our time to soak up the atmosphere, we walked past the Church of Santa Adelina Assunta on our way to the restaurant which was located right on the beach.

After dinner, we wandered back through the narrow streets.

"Let's go this way," I announced. I wanted to show Anni and Clara something.

As we walked back up a set of stone steps, Clara gasped as she caught sight of what I had wanted to show her. "Uncle Alessio, look at all the pussycats," Clara whispered.

I had taken them past a restaurant with a large metal roof. And there, lounging in the warm rays of the setting sun, were around thirty cats.

"They're cats on a hot tin roof," laughed Anni, making Clara giggle too.

"I thought you'd like it," I grinned.

We carried on through the boutique-lined streets, where the girls couldn't resist doing some shopping.

Juliana and Cate chose some ceramic bowls which were cobalt-blue and had a pattern in orange and yellow. “These will be perfect for our kitchen back home,” commented Juliana.

“They’ll remind us of our time here,” added Cate, shooting a secret smile at me which made my heart clench with love.

10 MONTHS LATER

CATE

I came down to breakfast and found the whole family already sitting around the kitchen island and tucking into their food.

“Hey, you don’t look great,” said Alessio with a frown.

“I feel really rough and so nauseous. I think I’ve got a stomach bug.” I collapsed into my usual chair and rested my head on top of my arms.

“Don’t tell me that you’ve got food poisoning, Cate,” interjected Camillo. “Juliana, I keep telling you that you shouldn’t be cooking—you’ll kill us all. Forget about the Fratellanza being the biggest danger in our lives, it’s got nothing on your lethal cooking skills.”

Juliana looked up. “I haven’t had time for cooking the last few days. Maximo has been taking up all my time. It was Marco who made dinner last night.” She said this as Marco bounced their son on his lap while she spooned porridge into the baby’s eager mouth. “Our son is proving to be a lot to handle—he never gives us a minute’s peace and I don’t know where he puts all this food.”

“He hasn’t slept through an entire night since he was born, so he needs to get his energy from somewhere,” grumbled Marco.

I had buttered a slice of toast for myself and had only taken two bites when my stomach started to churn violently. I pushed my chair back and leaped up from the table, running for the bathroom where I threw up. Alessio came after me and held my hair back from my face. “Oh God, I feel awful.”

After I’d finished, Alessio helped me to my feet, and I splashed cold water on my face and rinsed out my mouth.

“Come on, cara, let’s sit you down.”

Alessio put his arm around my waist and helped me back to the kitchen, and I gratefully sank back into my chair and let him pour me some tea. I looked at my food with despair. “I don’t think I can face anything to eat.”

Camillo looked at me. “Jeez, that’s the second morning this week that you’ve thrown up.”

I carried on sipping my tea and then felt everyone’s eyes on me. “What?” I said, feeling a bit uncomfortable with their stares.

“What’s wrong with you all?” I said, a bit louder.

Alessio grinned at me. “Do you think that maybe…maybe…”

My head was throbbing, and my stomach was still doing cartwheels. “For God’s sake, Alessio, just spit it out.” I’d never known him to be so lost for words.

“That you could be pregnant?”

I froze, with my cup halfway to my mouth. If Juliana hadn’t given me food poisoning, and I was being sick in the mornings, that could mean that I was expecting a baby. I crashed my cup down onto the table. “Oh…I didn’t think…I don’t know. I guess it’s a possibility but—”

Juliana didn’t give me a chance to say anything else. She grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the stairs. “Come on, Cate, I’ve got a couple of pregnancy tests in my bathroom. Let’s go find out.”

And before I could say anything further, I found myself being pulled up the staircase. I was still feeling awful, but at the same time there was a giddy sense of something else in my stomach.

Alessio was hot on our heels and followed us up to Marco and Juliana’s bedroom.

“Here you go, Cate.” She handed a small box over to me. “I’ll leave you guys to it, but don’t keep us all in suspense too long—come down as soon as you can.”

I took the box, and we walked down the hallway to our bedroom and I sank down on the bed, feeling a little bewildered. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Nothing’s happening until you do the test and we know one way or another.”

I nodded. “Okay, here it goes.” I went to the bathroom and returned a couple of minutes later with the test stick.

“How long do we have to wait?” asked Alessio.

“It says three minutes.”

“Okay, I’m timing it on my phone.”

We sat down on the edge of the bed together, holding hands and waiting. “Oh my God, this feels like a lifetime. What if I’m pregnant? What if I’m not?” My mind kept swinging from one possibility to the other.

“Let’s just wait and see.” As usual, Alessio was controlled, and he was more focused on timing the test than on getting carried away thinking about the possibilities.

After a while, two lines appeared. “There’re two lines, Cate. What does that mean?”

“I don’t know…”

“Let me go grab the box.” Alessio rushed into the bathroom and came back with the leaflet from the box. He started reading from the beginning of the leaflet, including all the precautions and warnings, infuriating me with his methodical manner.

“Let me see.” I grabbed it from him. “We don’t need to read the whole instructions—we just need to get to the most important part about what the lines mean.” Alessio was so calm in everything he did, but I didn’t have any patience left and just wanted to find out.

I scanned the instructions. “Oh my God. It says here about two lines. Oh my God…”

“What do they mean?”

“It means we’re pregnant.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“Are you sure that’s what the instructions say? You haven’t read the whole leaflet properly. Let me take a look.”

“See, it says here we’re having a baby!” I pointed to the relevant section.

Alessio looked at me in shock for a moment. Then he stood, pulled me up from the bed, and whirled me around before kissing me passionately.

I laughed, and he laughed with me. “I can’t believe I’m pregnant.”

As we spoke, I could see him doing calculations in his head, trying to figure out when it had happened. “It must have happened while we were in Italy,” he estimated. “Are you happy, cara?” Alessio said to me quietly, looking deep into my eyes, suddenly serious.

I had no hesitation in replying to him. “Definitely. I can think of nothing better than starting a family with you.”

Since Alessio and I had turned over a new leaf in Italy, I’d found out that he’d been right that day when he had told me that he would want to have me every morning and every night. And I wasn’t complaining. “I know things between us definitely got off to a rocky start. Once we made our peace with each other, no one could deny that this baby was conceived in love. It just took me a while to realize that I loved you.”

Alessio looked intensely at me. “I know things were hard for you at the start. I should have asked you, not your father, to sign the engagement contract. And I should have asked you whether you wanted a baby.”

“You knew I would have said no back then.”

“Yes, I did know that. I also knew you were the one for me—and I had to be sure that you would marry me so that I would be able to show you what I felt for you once we were wed.”

I smiled at my husband. “I think this news calls for a celebration.” My voice was husky, and I bit my lower lip.

“You can’t be serious. You’re pregnant now.”

“Yes, I’m pregnant. I’m not ill or breakable. Pregnant women can definitely have as much sex as they want.”

Alessio looked uncertain. “Maybe we should check with the doctor first…”

I slipped my hands around his neck. Feeling his warm skin against my fingertips, I pressed my mouth to his and then pushed him back onto the bed and straddled him, grinding myself against him.

“Oh, don’t do that, Cate,” he groaned. “You know I can’t resist you when you do that.”

“That’s the idea,” I laughed, but my laugh soon turned into a gasp as his hands reached under my top and fondled my nipples, and for the next half hour I was as lost to him as much as he was lost to me.

***

After we had tidied ourselves up and I’d brushed out my hair, we headed back downstairs. We held hands as we walked into the kitchen, and everyone looked at us expectantly.

“Well, it’s clear to see that the flush on your cheeks isn’t just due to receiving good news,” said Marco dryly. Everyone knew what we’d been up to, and normally that sort of comment would have made me turn bright red, but today I didn’t care.

“You’re pregnant?” questioned Juliana.

“Yes…”

“Oh my goodness!” She ran up to me and hugged me tight. “This is so exciting. I can’t believe it. Did you hear that, Maximo? You’re going to have a baby cousin! I hope it’s a boy and then they can play together.”

“Yeah, that might distract the little tyrant long enough to give us both a break,” said Marco as he kissed my cheek and hugged me.

“Hey, congratulations, man.” Camillo grabbed Alessio in a bear hug.

Soon everyone was talking at once while they congratulated us and hugged and kissed us, and I thought to myself that marrying Alessio was the best thing that could have happened to me. He had been right when he had said that we were made for each other.

***

That night, I laid back in bed, sated after another round of sex. Juliana had dug out her pregnancy books and I had shown a section to Alessio which specifically stated that sex was fine for pregnant women. I wouldn't be able to go through the next nine months without it.

"I love you, Alessio Marchiano, even though you've turned me into a nymphomaniac," I gasped. I was slowly getting my breath back after Alessio had brought me to an earth-shattering orgasm.

"I think you always were destined to be one. It just took me to show you the ropes."

"And you definitely enjoyed doing that, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. And I can't wait to try even more things with you, but maybe I'll leave some of the more adventurous stuff until after this baby's been born."

After that time at the Marchiano villa in the swimming pool, it had become one of our favorite spots for lovemaking. I would never have believed that I would enjoy the thrill of having sex outdoors, but Alessio had brought all sorts of things out of me.

And the best thing he'd brought out of me was the willingness to trust someone and love them. I knew now that he would never hurt me like my father had. His love was whole and complete, and he showed me that every day we were together—and now I showed him the same back.

7 MONTHS LATER

CATE

I turned over in bed and sighed.

“Are you okay, Cate?”

“No, I’m not okay. My back has been aching all day and I can’t get comfortable with this huge bump. I just want this baby to be born now.”

“You’re only three days overdue, cara. First babies are often late and it’s not a sign of anything to worry about.” Alessio sounded like a textbook.

“I know it’s not anything to worry about, but I’ve had enough of being pregnant and I just want to meet our baby now.”

“Just be patient. The baby will come in its own time when it’s ready.” As usual, Alessio was calm and controlled and wasn’t letting anything ruffle him.

“I am being patient,” I snapped. “There’s nothing else I can be right now. I need the bathroom.” I sat up and tried to get out of bed. “No one warned me how difficult it would be to get out of bed when you are nine months and three days pregnant. The book says all you need to do is roll over onto your side and then get up from that position, but no doubt a man came up with that advice because I’m telling you it doesn’t work.”

“Hold on, I’ll help you.” Alessio came around to my side of the bed and pulled me up.

“Oh great, that makes me feel even more like the size of an elephant when I need someone to heave me to my feet,” I grumbled, too annoyed to even thank Alessio for his help. These last few days of the pregnancy were

really trying me. I went into the bathroom but returned to the bedroom a few seconds later.

“Alessio?”

He sat up again. “Do you need some help?”

“I think my water just broke.”

“What?”

“The baby’s coming.”

Alessio leaped to his feet. “What the hell?” Alessio ran past me and rushed down the stairs.

I looked over the top of the banister. “Where are you going?”

“We need the car!” he shouted back over his shoulder.

“What about me?” I wailed.

But he didn’t reply as he was already on his cell phone, telling the perimeter guards that we were on our way and ordering them to open up the gates.

I looked back at the bedroom and decided to get my hospital bag myself. It had been Alessio who had insisted that I pack it when I reached the five-month point, so it had been sitting ready for the last four months.

Alessio was a bit of a control freak—he had an Excel spreadsheet set up with all the details for my scans, check-ups, and antenatal care, plus all the dates for the baby’s vaccinations until the age of five. I tried to tell him that babies weren’t analytical business deals where everything was set in stone, but this sort of over-planning was just his nature.

He’d even typed up a shortlist of names for both boys and girls, in order of preference, together with the meaning of each name and their popularity calculated as a percentage of all babies born in the US within the last twelve months. However, the most work had gone into the daily schedule he’d

drawn up after reading numerous books and his timetable included feed times, nap times, and diaper change times.

I picked up my hospital bag and slowly made my way down the staircase and into the kitchen to get myself a glass of water. There I found Marco and Juliana awake, together with a shrieking Maximo. “What are you guys doing up? It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Welcome to our world,” muttered Marco darkly. “You’ll soon find out what it’s like once your little bundle of joy arrives. I’ve tried telling Alessio that the baby is not going to obey that schedule he’s set out in the spreadsheet.”

“Me too,” I sighed. “He’s going to be in for a rude awakening when the baby arrives and he realizes that the baby has a mind of its own which doesn’t correlate with his schedule. I think he just needs to feel in control somehow."

“Here, let me take that from you.” Marco reached out to take my hospital bag from my hand.

“With all these guys in the house, you’d think one of them would offer to bring your hospital bag down rather than you having to lug it down the stairs yourself,” observed Juliana, as she munched on biscotti.

I was standing by the open front door, but Alessio was nowhere to be seen and the car he normally used was gone. “Where is he?” I asked in confusion.

Marco gestured up the driveway. “He said he was driving up to the gates to make sure that the guards had opened them.”

“But I thought he already phoned them to let them know to open it, and anyway they can see any car approaching well before it reaches the gates!”

I collapsed on a chair at the kitchen counter as my back hurt too much to stay on my feet. “I may as well have a cup of tea before I go,” I sighed, helping myself to the pot of tea Juliana had made and set on the counter.

Maximo was already walking, and I watched him trying to wake up Mr. Fluffy. The dog wasn’t having it though, and he sleepily pricked his ears up and opened one eye before sinking back down into his doggy slumber.

“For God’s sake, I can’t believe that dog can sleep through all the racket that kid is making. He’d be a hopeless guard dog,” complained Marco. I could tell he was desperate for the dog to wake up and play with Maximo so that he and Juliana could have a break.

“What are you doing?” shrieked Alessio as he came into the kitchen. His hair was sticking up like he’d been running his hands through it. “We need to get to the hospital.”

“I thought you’d forgotten me. Anyway, the baby’s not coming for a long time yet, so we’ve got time to have a cup of tea.”

“There’s no time, Cate. The drive to the hospital takes exactly 27 minutes and 16 seconds. What if we don’t make it to the hospital in time?”

I took a deep breath to calm myself. “Then you would have to deliver the baby in the car. You can cope with a little blood and gore, surely? My bag is by the door—you can make yourself useful by putting it in the car.” I sat drinking my tea, ignoring Alessio glaring at me.

After finishing my drink, we said goodbye to Marco, Juliana and Maximo, and I let Alessio help me into the car.

He drove way too fast to the hospital and there were two SUVs full of soldiers right behind us. “Slow down. We’ve got plenty of time. We don’t want to get stopped by the police—that would delay us even more.”

“The cops wouldn’t dare to stop us.” He was right. The only time we tended to get stopped was by new cops who didn’t recognize the Marchiano family or our cars yet. The family had the local police in their back pockets, which helped when there were situations like killings or drug shipments going on, but it also came in use for more minor situations like traffic violations.

During the journey, Alessio rang the hospital six times with an updated ETA.

“Alessio, please calm down. The hospital has women coming in to give birth every day. They know what they’re doing.”

“They need to be prepared for when we arrive. I’m not leaving anything to chance.”

When we got there, we were met by the doctor and nurse with a wheelchair. However, Alessio ignored the wheelchair, scooped me up in his arms and ran with me into the hospital. “Which way?” he demanded.

The doctor suppressed her smile and led the way to the delivery room. Dr. Karen Testa delivered most of the babies in the Fratellanza, and she had told me that she was used to dealing with Made Men, their demands, and the threats they made when they were concerned about their wife and baby.

I had chosen to have a natural birth, and the nurse set up the room with the candles I had brought along, and I also had soothing music playing in the background. The hours ticked by as the labor progressed in its own time.

“Will someone switch that damn music off?” demanded Alessio. “I can’t think straight with it on.”

“No, leave it,” I said calmly to the nurse. “It’s to help me relax, and I’m the important one.”

“Dr. Testa, you’ve got to give us some pain relief,” Alessio pleaded.

Us? Anyone would think that he was going through the labor, I thought.

“Mr. Marchiano, your wife has asked for a natural birth. I’m more than happy to give her pain relief if she requests it, but she is the patient and I have to respect her wishes.”

“Her wishes, are you serious? I’m the Consigliere of the Fratellanza and I’m in charge here. Give her the pain relief. Right now, that’s an order!”

“No.” The doctor kept her voice firm.

I decided to intervene. “Why don’t you go get yourself some coffee, Alessio? It might help you relax. You don’t need to worry. Everything is going just fine so far. This is all what’s supposed to happen. The pain is just part of my body preparing to give birth. It’s natural, and it’s what a woman’s body is supposed to do. You rarely take pain relief even after you’ve taken a bullet. If men can tolerate pain, so can women.”

“But I’m a man. Pain is part of my job.”

“And I’m a woman and it’s part of my role to give birth.”

After some more persuasion, Alessio finally agreed to go to the coffee shop after I told him that I wanted a hot chocolate to keep my energy up. Once he had left, I apologized to Dr. Testa.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Marchiano. A lot of Made Men are like this. They’re so used to being in control and having their orders followed that the uncertainty of labor wreaks havoc with their emotions.”

“Alessio is a control freak in every aspect of his life. At least once the baby is born, things can go back to normal.”

The doctor laughed. “Well, maybe if it’s a boy. If it’s a girl, my experience tells me that the men get even more irrational and overprotective.”

“I don’t mind if it’s a boy or a girl but whatever we have, Alessio definitely is going to have to learn to be a bit less uptight.”

ALESSIO

I grabbed a hot chocolate for Cate and a coffee for myself. I paced up and down the hospital corridor, trying to calm myself down. I knew I was being irrational and demanding and overbearing. But this was my baby, and I would do whatever I needed to protect it and Cate.

After gulping down my coffee, I went back into the delivery room. Before entering, I took a deep breath and tried to tell myself to remain calm.

I was used to being obeyed. But this doctor kept deferring to Cate’s wishes. All the candles and music were making it hard for me to think straight, or maybe it was the stress of the situation. I wasn’t used to feeling this stressed out or out of control.

When it was time for the baby to be delivered, I held Cate’s hand tightly and watched as she put all her remaining energy into pushing out our baby.

When I heard the first cry, I let out my breath, which I hadn’t realized I’d been holding in. I bent down and gave Cate a kiss, looking deep into her eyes. She’d done it, and I was so relieved to see that she was okay.

“Alessio, what is it?”

“Huh?”

“The baby, is it a boy or girl?” Cate was craning her neck to try and see.

“You have a healthy baby boy, Mr. and Mrs. Marchiano,” said the doctor, proudly holding up the bundle. The baby gave up another small cry but then

happily snuggled down to sleep as the nurse wrapped him in a clean blanket and placed him in Cate's arms.

I wrapped my arms around her and the baby and just looked down at the perfect little boy.

"Hello, Alexander," she whispered to our baby.

"That wasn't the number one choice on our list?" I said, perplexed.

"I don't care about the list. He looks like a Alexander—what do you think?"

I looked down at Cate and the baby, and I found the baby already tugging at my heartstrings. The same way that I had fallen in love so quickly and completely with Cate was suddenly happening with this baby as well. And I realized how lucky I was to have not only Cate and the baby in my life but also to have found this sort of unconditional love.

"Yes, I like the name Alexander. It definitely suits him."

Then I kissed the top of Cate's head, and as I stroked Alexander's palm, I watched our son curl his tiny fist around my finger. And I thought that life couldn't get any more perfect than this.

Thanks so much for reading. Already missing Alessio and Cate? See here for a free **BONUS EPILOGUE**: https://dl.bookfunnel.com/d6pn1bbgig

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SNEAKPEEK

HAVE YOU READ…

MAFIA AND ANGEL
AN AGE GAP ARRANGED MARRIAGE ROMANCE
(MARCHIANO MAFIA SERIES)

CHAPTER 1

Santa Adelina, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
— the words every Made Man recites upon a death.

ANNUNCIATA

“Okay, I’ve finished my math now,” I said, as I slammed my book shut and leaned back in my chair at the antique table, stretching out my arms. It should have taken at least an hour to complete my assignment for college; however, as usual, it had only taken me a fraction of the time.

I was glad I’d finished before Ma got home. She thought I was too serious—getting good grades and doing my homework on time were not traits looked for in a good Mafia daughter. I knew I was a bit of a nerd, but I loved math and figures.

“So, Wilbur, that means I’ve got time to give you a tummy rub.”

The fluffy white cat gracefully leaped up onto the seat of the chair next to me and rolled onto his back, curling his front paws under his chin while he gazed at me with his large blue eyes.

I was in the dining room of my papà’s Staten Island mansion. Set high on a hill with the bright lights of the city glittering across the water, my papà had sought to provide us with the most opulent home.

Its shimmering chandeliers and gleaming marble columns shone fiercely in an attempt to distract us from the glare of the silver bullets that my family shot from their guns. Because my papà, brothers, uncles, and cousins ran the Imperiosi Mafia in New York, and each one of them could give Hades a run for his money when it came to ruling the underworld.

“You really are a handsome boy,” I cooed to Wilbur, as I ran my hand over the soft fur of our family pet.

“If you keep talking to him like that, Anni, everyone’s going to think that you’re a crazy-cat-lady,” said my older sister, Fidella, as she walked into the

dining room. She carried a dish she had borrowed from Ma yesterday. Even though she was married, she and her family still spent a lot of time at our place.

I grinned at her. “I have to do something to pass the time. It’s not as if I have a wide circle of friends I can spend time with. You know what it’s like, Fee. Our social circle is pretty much confined to Mafia families. Even at school, the non-Mafia kids avoid us ‘connected’ kids like we're the Cullen vampire family from Twilight.”

Just then, Wilbur decided it was time for a nap and stalked over to the dark green chaise longue, curling up on the end in a patch of sun.

As I watched him, I ran my hand over my blonde bob.

Fidella eyed me critically. “Jeez, Anni, Ma’s going to have a coronary when she sees that your hair is even shorter.”

“The stylist only took off two centimeters exactly when I had it trimmed earlier today.”

“Ma still hates your short hair. She thinks it’s going to massively affect your marriage prospects.”

I divided my hair into two and started to put each side into a French braid. “I think she’s getting used to it. She’s definitely complaining less about it. I mean, I did cut it over two years ago. I didn’t think she would hold a grudge against it for quite so long.”

My hair skimmed the top of my shoulders, so it wasn’t super short, but it was much shorter than most Mafia girls and women wore their hair.

Our institution was traditional, and many still believed that the main role of women was to look attractive for their husbands. The traditionalists held a non-negotiable view that females should wear elegant dresses, high heels, a full face of make-up, and have long swishy hair.

I pulled a hair tie around my first completed braid. “Anyway, Ma knows I’ve always wanted to study math at college. And since Papà is allowing me to do that, there’s absolutely no way that I’m going to be a Mafia wife at the age of twenty. I’ve got a brain and I’m going to use it.”

“You’ve always been so determined about it, I’ll give you that,” chuckled my sister.

My ma said that a woman in the Mafia world having ambition was akin to opening Pandora’s box: it would lead to conflict, destruction, and ruin. If you asked me, I thought Ma was being overdramatic. Anyway, many people seemed to miss the hidden potential in what Pandora had done. She’d been forbidden by Zeus from looking inside the gilded box; when her curiosity, however, meant that she’d opened it and unleashed a tyranny of unforeseen problems upon mankind, she had also revealed everlasting hope. Hope could be seen as good or evil. Personally, I liked to look on the bright side.

And so, for me, ambition and my college degree were a ticket not to problems, but to hope—and my hope was to use my talent for math and put it to good use.

“I’m sure,” I carried on, “that I’ll eventually manage to persuade Papà to let me help in the business on the paperwork side.”

“Ma will hate that idea as well.”

“All done,” I said, as I put a tie around the second completed braid and checked my reflection in the dining room mirror. “What do you think?”

“Cute,” grinned Fee, as she walked out of the room and headed for the kitchen.

I wandered around the house and finally into the backyard. There I found that someone hadn’t tidied up after their shooting practice, instead leaving out empty beer bottles and a revolver on the patio table.

Wilbur scampered outside and leaped onto the table, deciding to keep me company instead of having a nap.

I picked up the revolver and loaded it. This would do to pass the time. I mean, what harm could it possibly do?

LORENZO

I was in a car with my cousin, Marco Marchiano—he was Capo of the Fratellanza in Chicago, and I was one of his Underbosses.

Together with Marco's brothers, we were known as the Kings of Chicago, running the city with a brutality and ruthlessness that had propelled the Fratellanza to being one of the most powerful Mafia families in the United States.

We'd come to Staten Island today for a meeting with our new ally, Napoleone Veneti, Capo of the Imperiosi in New York.

I was exhausted and tried to distract myself from my tiredness by taking in my surroundings. "This is my first time in New York in years," I remarked, watching out of the window. Marco had set up this new alliance only a month ago, so the relationship was still in its early stages.

As we drove toward the Veneti mansion in the Todt Hill area, I saw a large glossy sign announcing that we'd arrived in Venetiville. "I thought this was Staten Island?" I said, a frown of confusion tugging at my brow.

"Yeah, it is," replied Marco. "But this little corner of Staten Island has been renamed by Napoleone Veneti."

"Renamed—what, after himself? What a self-obsessed moron." I wasn't in the best of moods today. I was thirty years old and a single dad. Being a

single parent, with two young children who woke every night, was far from an easy job.

I was tired and irritable, and I didn't see that improving anytime soon. And the way things were going, I didn't see my four-year-old daughter, Clara, ever getting over the death of her mom. At least my son was younger and barely remembered his mother.

Marco looked across at me. "Napoleone might be a self-obsessed moron, but he's our self-obsessed moron now. This alliance between our families will increase our overall power and help get the Bratva off our backs. They've gained too much power and territory recently, and this is our best way of fighting back."

After clearing a security checkpoint, we entered the gated community.

I stared around myself. 'Gated community' was an understatement. Venetiville was surrounded by an electrified perimeter, barbed wire, and look-out towers complete with machine-gun-toting soldiers.

As we drove up to the Veneti mansion, however, the whole ambience changed, and it was like I was in a holiday resort. I saw tennis courts, a huge outdoor pool, lush green lawns, and magnificent homes which any Made Man would be proud of.

"What's that place?" I pointed to a large building next to the tennis courts. It was white stucco, with white shutters around the windows and pillars on either side of the doors.

"It's the clubhouse."

"The clubhouse? For what?"

"The Venetiville Country Club."

I looked at Marco in disbelief. "The Imperiosi Mafia have their own country club?"

“Yeah. Fucking hilarious, isn’t it?”

“Hilarious is one word for it,” I muttered.

We pulled up in front of a mansion. It was a grand, colonial-style house built from dark bricks, and it looked to have three main floors.

As I got out of our black Mercedes and stood on the front lawn, I had a direct view of the nearby church whose roof was adorned with one of the largest crucifixes I’d ever seen—this was what Napoleone Veneti saw every time he left his house.

“The church is called St. Napoleone’s,” chuckled Marco.

“He is just being fucking ridiculous now,” I griped. “Who the fuck names a church after themselves? I’m surprised that Napoleone hasn’t replaced the Jesus on the crucifix with an image of himself.”

“The crucifix emphasizes Jesus's sacrifice: his death by crucifixion,” remarked Marco. “But I doubt Napoleone would ever sacrifice himself, as Jesus did, for the redemption of mankind.”

“True,” I admitted grudgingly. “Like most Made Men, Napoleone loves killing others just a bit too much to give up his own life.”

Napoleone greeted us at the dark-stained oak door of his mansion. “Welcome to Venetiville,” he boomed—as if we hadn’t already figured out that we were in his territory. “Come in, come in,” he welcomed.

We stepped inside the wood-paneled hallway.

“Would you like coffee?”

“That would be good,” replied Marco, with a shark-like smile. I nodded as well, being parched after our trip here. After this meeting, we also planned to drive into the city to pay a visit to Napoleone’s illegal casino. It was a highly profitable income stream for him, particularly since he had local law enforcement in his back pocket.

“Fidella! Anni!” he called out, but no one answered. “My daughters must have gone out,” he sighed. “If no one else is home, I won’t be able to operate the damn new coffee machine, but come to my study and I will fix us a whiskey instead and we can get down to business.”

Another car with some more of our soldiers had also parked up, and those men would keep guard while we were inside. The alliance was still in its infancy, and we weren’t taking any chances.

The study was suitably grand, as befitting the Capo of the Imperiosi. Its centerpiece was an original oak and stone fireplace, while the large windows were topped with smaller panes of antique stained glass.

After the drinks had been poured, Marco and I settled back into the comfortable leather armchairs. I took a sip of my whisky and let the smooth, smoky liquid slide down my throat and soothe my mind.

As I was about to take another sip, gunshots rang out from somewhere in the house.

Pop! Pop!

What the fuck? Napoleone had said no one was home. That meant someone had broken in and was trying to kill the Marchianos, Napoleone Veneti, or all of us.

I flung my tumbler to the floor as I sprang to my feet and drew out my revolver.

I was nearest to the door. I ran over to it and threw it open. Napoleone and Marco were close behind me.

I heard Napoleone shouting into his cell phone for backup.

I sprinted toward the back of the house where the sound had come from. Our soldiers were also running through the house toward the gunshots.

Pop!

Hearing another shot come from the backyard, I saw a flash of movement through a window and caught a glimpse of someone holding a gun.

I ran through the open back door, pointing my gun at the intruder.

The person with the gun spun on their heel as they turned their body toward me. And, with a gun raised in their hand, they aimed straight at me.

CHAPTER 2

ANNUNCIATA

Fuck! A scary looking man was running out of the house with his weapon aimed at me!

I told myself to stay calm as I pointed my gun at him.

My finger squeezed the trigger.

Pop!

I missed!

I aimed again.

Before I could shoot again, Papà ran into the yard and yelled at me. “It’s okay, Anni! This is Lorenzo Marchiano.” Papà hurried over to me and caught my arm, just as some soldiers ran into the yard. “It’s fine,” he called to the soldiers. “It’s just a misunderstanding. Everyone’s just got a bit carried away.”

Suddenly, I went very still. “Marchiano?” I repeated slowly.

I had never met the man; however, of course, I had heard of him. He was an Underboss in the Fratellanza. And, as a Marchiano, he was now one of

our allies—not an enemy as I'd first thought when he'd burst into the backyard and aimed his revolver at me.

Uh-oh. I was going to have to change my name, move to Costa Rica, and fake my own death for good measure.

"I didn't know who he was," I said quickly.

Up behind my papà came the Fratellanza Capo, whom I had previously met. But I had never met Lorenzo before.

"Lorenzo, this is my daughter, Anni."

I looked at him properly for the first time. He was tall, good-looking, and looked ruthlessly fit under his expensive suit. He had dark, almost-black hair, while his eyes were deep brown and glinting fiercely as they glared at me.

Despite the beautiful proportions of his face and the sort of body women would sigh over, something in his expression hinted at the darkness within him. And a sense of raw masculinity and danger rolled off him in waves as his stare on me intensified.

Goosebumps erupted on my arms under his piercing gaze. He was notorious within the underworld: he was the devil dressed in Brioni and black, and his darkness dimmed the bright lights of the city he ruled with his cousins.

And now his ruthless attention was fixed on me.

I licked my lips. "Papà, I didn't know he was one of the Marchianos. He was going to shoot me. I was just killing some time by practicing my shooting."

"Do you always just shoot at random strangers?" Lorenzo growled at me, stepping closer so that he towered over me with his threatening presence.

I glared at him. “What were you so scared of that you needed to pull your weapon on me? I mean, I'm five-foot-nothing and a girl.”

“Look, everyone just needs to calm down,” soothed my papà, trying to defuse the tension. “Anni likes to practice her shooting skills from time to time. It’s good for a girl to know how to protect herself.”

“You let your daughter fool around with guns?” Lorenzo’s words hurtled through the air. “She tried to kill me!”

My blood heated at his condescending tone. “I'm not used to shooting running targets. But if I'd been given five more seconds, I would have definitely killed you, trust me.” I knew I should keep quiet at this point, but my mouth just kept on babbling. All the while, Wilbur still sat on the patio table, watching with interest what all the commotion was about and cleaning his paws at the same time.

“Anni…” Papà admonished gently. I had never dared to speak like this to a stranger, especially not to one who was also a Made Man. “I still don’t understand why you shot at him?”

I took a deep breath, attempting to steady my racing pulse. “The bottles and guns were out. I was bored, so I decided to do some firing practice. Then he came out of nowhere and pulled his gun on me. What did you want me to do, Papà, call 911? You know you always tell us never to call the authorities and that we can handle any dangers by ourselves.”

My dad ran his hand through his gray hair. “I meant that the men can handle any dangers, Anni. You should have called for me if you were scared.”

“There was no time,” I exclaimed. “He already had his gun aimed at me, and he was about to kill me."

Lorenzo took another step closer and grabbed at the gun in my hand. "Give me that before you hurt yourself."

I wasn't going to give him my weapon, so before he could take it, I jerked my hand away. And Wilbur, sensing Lorenzo's tension toward me, simultaneously swiped at him with his sharp claws.

"What the fuck?" snapped Lorenzo, yanking his hand back and staring at the lines of bright red blood spreading over the back of his hand. His eyes darted up at Wilbur, and he growled at him with a murderous look gleaming in his eyes.

Before Lorenzo could hurt Wilbur, I snatched up our pet and hugged him to my chest while at the same time dashing to the other side of the patio table so that it was a barrier between us.

But Lorenzo clenched his jaw tight and took another stride forward while giving Wilbur a menacing look.

Without further thought, I raised my arm and fired my weapon.

The bullet skimmed his upper arm before hitting the wall of the house behind him.

"Fuck!" Lorenzo snarled, his hand flying to his right arm.

"Don't even think about killing the cat," I said icily as he examined the hole the bullet had burned into his jacket. "That was a warning shot. I deliberately only damaged your Brioni suit. Come any closer and my next bullet will take out the lateral cutaneous nerve in your forearm."

Lorenzo's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah," I nodded, "my brothers have taught me where best to aim if I want to disarm a man."

"Anni, what are you doing?" Papà asked in confusion.

"He wants to kill Wilbur!"

“Anni, dear, of course he won't kill our cat,” reasoned Papà. “This is all a big misunderstanding.”

"Didn't you see the look in his eyes when Wilbur scratched him? And he growled at the cat." I had grown up around Made Men, and I knew murderous intent when I saw it.

“Jesus Christ,” gritted out Lorenzo. “She might be your daughter, but she’s batshit crazy.”

I bet he would kill the cat if given half a chance, I thought to myself. He looked like the type who got off on hurting poor innocent souls.

My papà might have trusted him, but I certainly didn’t.

LORENZO

I glared at the girl in front of me.

Her tousled white-blonde hair was styled into two short braids around a face that was free of make-up. Her doe-like green eyes gave her a softness that belied the feistiness I’d just witnessed in her.

She was wearing faded jeans and a weird top that was white, flowy, and had sleeves that looked like batwings.

We heard the front door open and then footsteps in the hallway before female voices wafted through the house toward us.

A lady wearing a leather mini-skirt and low-cut red top tottered into the backyard on the highest of heels, chewing gum as she made her way toward Napoleone, loudly asking what was going on. We all still had our weapons drawn, although they were now at our sides rather than aimed.

Napoleone started to explain to her what had happened.

“Is that hooker her mother?” I murmured to Marco in horror.

“Nope. That’s her Aunt Priscilla.” Marco kept his voice low. “That other woman, Fantasia Veneti, is her mother.” He nodded toward another woman who had just stepped into the backyard.

The mother had an over-ample figure which was clad in a black dress. She also wore ridiculously large gold earrings and carried an enormous black purse. I couldn’t stop my eyes from staring at her shock of carrot-colored hair, which seemed to be a dye job’s bad attempt at a shade of auburn. At least the tacky mom was a slight improvement on the trashy aunt.

Jesus fucking Christ. This family was supposed to be rolling in money, yet these women were dressed like trash and hookers.

What ensued was a conversation on how to make right what had just happened. Soldiers from both the Fratellanza and Imperiosi had witnessed the whole incident.

“It’s a sign of utter disrespect toward the Fratellanza for your daughter to have fired at my Underboss,” growled Marco. He was beyond pissed, and his infamous short temper did not bode well for the future of this alliance.

“I can assure you that Anni meant no disrespect,” Napoleone blustered, the girl standing at his side. “It is all a big misunderstanding. She never meant to fire the gun or hurt anyone.”

“Like hell she didn’t,” I said tersely.

“Whatever she meant, the fact is that she did shoot at one of my Underbosses.” Marco’s tone was severe. “You know that can’t go unpunished.”

“To punish her would be too harsh,” Napoleone wheedled. “Why not have a marriage between our families instead, as a gesture of goodwill and

to solidify the alliance? Anni can marry into your family, and we can demonstrate to our respective organizations that all is well between our families."

Anni's eyes widened as she heard her father's suggestion, but thankfully the girl kept her mouth shut.

I could see Marco considering the idea before he looked at me. "She should marry you, Lorenzo. That will show our men that she's been brought under control and tamed by us."

I stared at my Capo like he had suddenly grown two heads. "I'm not sure the girl is tameable." I curled my lip. "She's like a wildcat."

Marco turned to our host. "Lorenzo and I need to talk privately if we are to consider such a marriage."

"Of course, I understand completely. Use the drawing room. I'll make sure no one disturbs you there."

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We made our way to the drawing room.

As soon as the doors were closed, I turned to Marco. "There's no way in hell I'm marrying that girl. She's not wife material."

"If she's married off to you, she'll have to settle down and stop messing around," said Marco. "Being a wife, plus raising a two-year-old and a four-year-old, will be no walk in the park for her." Marco looked at me with a hard look in his eyes. "Lorenzo, you need a wife. Rita has been dead for over a year."

What he really meant was that some people thought I still wasn't over my dead wife, and that made me look weak in the eyes of my men. And he was right that I wasn't over what had happened. Fury still raced through me every time I thought about Rita.

I sighed inwardly. I was thirty years old, a widower, and I was raising two children by myself.

My mother now helped with looking after the children. Even still, being a single dad was more work than I'd ever imagined. I was muddling through the physical side of looking after them day-to-day, but I had no idea of how to deal with the emotional side of helping the kids through their mother's death, nor how to banish my own demons.

After the whole shitshow with Rita, I'd swore I'd never get involved with another woman again.

"You're barely coping with looking after the kids," Marco added, not letting this topic go.

Normally, I would do anything for my Capo, but when shit like this came up and people started interfering in my personal life, then I started to feel resentful.

Weariness suddenly consumed me. My role as an Underboss was demanding and left little time for child-rearing. Perhaps Marco was right? If the girl was my wife, she would have to submit to me and obey me.

"Maybe the girl wouldn't be too bad as a wife," I said thoughtfully. "She's probably the way she is due to a lack of discipline from her parents. Her father didn't even seem that angry with her for shooting at me—I mean, what the fuck?"

"There's the wellbeing of the alliance to consider," Marco carried on. The Fratellanza's interests were mainly in the drug trade, laundering the dirty

money through our legitimate businesses of hotels and clubs, the net result being that we had become extremely wealthy. “There’s always someone trying to muscle into our territory, and currently that someone is the Bratva, which means that our alliance with the Imperiosi is crucial because it will unite our organizations against our common enemy.”

We talked about this some more, although I still wasn’t entirely convinced. We returned to Napoleone to discuss the matter further, however, with the critical aim of preserving our fledgling alliance with the Imperiosi.

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As we talked some more in the study about the possibility of a marriage union, Mrs. Veneti came in with a tray of coffee.

“She’s not old enough to marry,” I said. “She still wears her hair in pigtails.”

“They’re not pigtails,” the girl interrupted. “They’re French braids.” She continued standing at her father’s side. I wasn’t sure why she was still even here—this matter was between her father and the Fratellanza.

Her response riled me further. “The girl is completely out of control,” I gritted out. “No girl in my family would dare shoot a gun at a Made Man.”

Mrs. Veneti interrupted. “It was the shock—you know, of having a weapon aimed at her. She was staring down the barrel of a gun. Annunciata is the sweetest, most obedient girl you could ever meet—an absolute angel.”

The way her mother spoke, anyone would think that the girl spent all her spare time polishing a halo.

As Mrs. Veneti batted her fake eyelashes at me, I wondered if I had judged the girl too harshly. I had probably scared her when I pulled my gun on her, and the girl had probably been in shock when she shot at me the second time. If Mrs. Veneti was saying that her daughter was obedient, then I knew I could take her word for it—after all, I knew that Mrs. Veneti wouldn't lie to me, especially not in the presence of her husband.

"She's still a teenager," I observed. The obvious age gap between us was a concern for me.

"Annunciata turned twenty last week," announced her mother, as if one week made a world of difference.

"Papà, I don't want to get married," interjected the girl.

"Anni, dear, you've always known that you would have an arranged marriage," Napoleone responded in a soothing voice. "It's just come a little sooner than expected. You are of age now, and he will make a good husband."

Why the fuck was he talking to her in such an appeasing tone, as if he were trying to persuade her to marry me?

He should be commanding his daughter to do her duty, not pussyfooting around her sensitivities. No wonder she was so out of control—she was spoiled and her parents pandered to her whims.

"Is she good with children?" My tone was terse. "I have a four-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy who will need looking after."

"Our daughter has a compassionate personality," replied Mrs. Veneti. "Annunciata is the most nurturing person you'll ever meet."

I looked the girl over. With her blonde hair and eyes that sparkled like emeralds, she was pretty in her own way. I liked that she didn't have that overtly flirtatious manner that many young girls from Mafia families adopted when they were looking to snare a husband, although I wasn't sure I liked her feistiness.

She just needed someone to take control of her, I told myself. As my wife, she would no longer have time to waste on doing irresponsible things like running around and shooting guns.

And Marco was right—I needed to remarry at some point so that my children would have a mother figure in their lives. And this was particularly important given how much the kids were currently struggling, especially Clara. If I needed to remarry, I might as well marry someone who looked vaguely attractive. "Very well. I will marry her."

Everyone gave a sigh of relief. The marriage would avert a war breaking out between our organizations, and our alliance could continue intact.

"My daughter is going to be married!" shrieked Mrs. Veneti. "We should set the wedding date today."

"There's no rush for that, Mrs. Veneti—" I began.

"You're part of the family now. You're to call me Ma Veneti—I insist!"

"Ma Veneti?" I exclaimed in horror.

"He'd be honored to call you that," interrupted Marco, a fucking smirk plastered across his face.

I really didn't want to have to call this woman 'Ma'. But this crazy family was determined to get their claws well and truly into me.

Dear God, what the fuck had I let myself in for?

ANNUNCIATA

The Marchianos departed shortly before dinner.

I was dying to talk to my papà, to persuade him that the marriage was a ridiculous idea. I hadn't dared to say anything more in front of the Marchianos. My papà was kind to me, but even he drew the limit at being disobeyed in front of company.

I had no desire to give up my current life, my college degree, and the relative freedoms I had. And especially not when it meant that I would be under the thumb of a man like Lorenzo Marchiano—a man who was arrogant, bad-tempered, and condescending.

The way he'd spoken to me today kept running through my mind—I couldn't believe the nerve of the man. He thought that women shouldn't handle weapons. He probably also thought that women didn't have the brain cells to study for a college degree and instead should spend all their time chained to the kitchen sink.

I sat at the dinner table with my parents and Aunt Priscilla. Also present were my two older brothers: Christian and Leoluca.

"You really fired a gun at him?" Christian chuckled, greatly amused at Aunt Priscilla's retelling of events. "I'm pissed now that I missed the meeting—I would love to have seen the look on the Marchianos' faces."

"The only important thing is that the alliance remains intact now that we have agreed on a marriage between Anni and Lorenzo Marchiano," said Papà in a serious voice.

I couldn't keep quiet any longer. "But Papà, surely you can't expect me to marry him? He's a murderer!"

“You won’t have to see that side of his life, Anni.” Papà took a sip of his wine as he spoke to me. “He’ll keep his work life separate from his home life, in the same way me and your brothers do.”

“I’m not talking about the Mafia stuff, Papà. I mean that he wanted to kill Wilbur. I bet he enjoys killing cats in his spare time—he looks like just the sort of man who would enjoy committing moggycides.”

“Anni, dear, I know the man,” Papà said in a placating voice. “Apart from extortion, drug dealing, and weapons trafficking, he’s a good man. He’s never killed a cat in his life. He only kills humans.”

“Are you sure, Papà?”

“Yes, I’m sure. There are no moggycides, my dear. The only things he commits are homicides.”

Talking about deaths, my thoughts drifted to his late wife. No one seemed to know how his first wife, Rita, had died, but that wasn’t unusual given that Mafia families were notoriously secretive about every aspect of their lives.

I chewed on my lower lip. Lorenzo Marchiano was rude, condescending, and overbearing. “It’s not as if I have a real choice in the matter, do I?” I asked glumly.

“No, Anni, you don’t,” said Papà in a steely voice. I knew that he wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise. This was business for him.

I sighed in defeat. “I’ll guess I’ll have to marry him then.”

CHAPTER 3

LORENZO

I had fallen into an uneasy sleep, dreaming about the events from one year earlier…

Rita was dead. May God forgive me...

Now I had to break the news to the children.

When I saw a car pull up outside, I went out to get three-year-old Clara and one-year-old Clemente. They had spent the day at my mother's house and had just been brought home.

"Dadda," greeted Clara in her small, shy voice, giving me that special smile of hers. It never failed to touch my heart—I could see in her face her love for me. And I knew that would change after she heard what I had to say.

I scooped them up, one in each arm, relishing the warmth of their tiny bodies as they perched against my cold body.

I brought them inside and sat them down next to me on the couch. They both had my dark hair and my brown eyes—and now those eyes were solemn as if they sensed something might be amiss.

I explained to them in the best way I could that their mother was dead.

Clemente was too young to understand, and as soon as I had finished speaking, he toddled off to play with his toy cars.

Clara sat very still as she listened carefully to me. Although she was having difficulty understanding what I was saying, she could sense from my tone that something was very wrong. She clung to me, holding tightly onto my arms with her small, chubby hands, and asked in a small voice, "When Momma come back?" Her big brown eyes brimmed with fear.

"Momma isn't coming back," I said.

As I looked at Clara and Clemente and watched the wretched tears tumble from my daughter's eyes, my heart clenched with guilt.

I had taken their mother away from them.

I was a monster.

I woke up with a start. It took me a moment to realize that I was in my bedroom. I sat up and checked the clock. It was only 3 a.m.

I collapsed back onto my pillows. I had been dreaming of that day again: the last day of Rita's life.

I let out a sound of frustration. Nothing had been the same since that day.

The only things I wanted in life now were to be successful at my work and to raise my children. I certainly didn't need any other complications in my life. And that's what Anni was: a complication.

But I knew it was too late to change my mind—the success of the alliance was what mattered.

I hated how much my life had changed since Rita's death. Clara had withdrawn into her shell. I hadn't seen her smile once since that day. Instead, there had been tears: so many tears and so much grief.

And it was all my fault.

ANNUNCIATA

Two weeks later, I was in the den watching television, trying to take my mind off tomorrow's engagement party.

My thoughts, however, kept wandering to Lorenzo.

I knew next to nothing about him except that his first wife was dead and he had two children.

I exhaled in frustration. I'd always planned to at least finish my college degree before I had to marry. My major was in math, and I enjoyed studying. I was sure I could be of use to Papà in his business, but no one had mentioned my college course when the engagement had been decided upon.

I decided it was best to keep quiet about it: if Lorenzo didn't know about my degree, he couldn't forbid me from carrying on with it.

All my study was by distance learning anyway—since there was no way that Papà would ever allow me to physically attend a college campus. So once married, all I had to do was find some time to squeeze in my studies when Lorenzo wasn't around. I was sure I would be able to manage that.

Ma came into the den, hugging a large bowl of popcorn to her chest.

Popcorn in front of the TV was one of Ma's favorite past-times, picking up the habit when she arrived in the States from Italy twenty years ago. She snatched up the TV remote and flicked the channel over.

"Ma, I'm watching a program about the workings of international stock markets," I exclaimed.

"There's no need to watch such nonsense." She waved a hand dismissively at me. "It has nothing to do with us." Because we earned our money illegally. "That isn't real life."

She turned over to her favorite reality show: The Real Housewives of Sunset Beach.

"We can watch this together instead," Ma said.

"But I really wanted to watch the other program," I protested.

Ma narrowed her eyes at me—and then burst into tears. “You d-don’t want to spend some q-q-quality time with your Ma before you get married?” she sobbed.

“I didn’t say that, Ma—”

“Yes, you did!” she snapped. “You’d said you’d rather watch that other program because you know I won’t stay and watch it with you.”

“Ma—”

“It’s always the same with you, wanting to watch these stupid money programs you know I can’t understand. I don’t think you love me anymore,” she wailed.

“You’re being silly,” I sighed.

In between her tears, she slid her beady eyes over to look at me. “And you probably already love Lorenzo more than you’ve ever loved me!”

I most certainly did not love Lorenzo. And I wasn’t going to fall for a sinner. Because you couldn’t catch feelings for a bad guy…could you? Anyway, I definitely didn’t want to talk to Ma about such things. “Okay, okay, we’ll watch the Real Housewives…”

At my words, the tears stopped—a bit too quickly, I thought with suspicion.

The opening credits of the latest episode began, and Ma sighed with pleasure as she watched the show and shoved handfuls of popcorn into her mouth.

Aunt Priscilla, dressed in an orange, leopard-print mini-skirt, came in and sat next to Ma. “These American women dress so trashy,” she uttered in horror as she looked at the screen.

“This is what living the American Dream must be like,” Ma said wistfully. “American women have no worries apart from wondering what to

wear, which party to go to, and what bitchy things they should say behind whose back."

Ma still considered herself Italian. To her, Americans were an alien species, their habits to be observed and commented upon.

"What happened on the last episode?" I asked, resigning myself to the fact that I wasn't going to get to watch the rest of the stock market program.

Ma's eyes lit up as she revealed the latest goings-on. "Brayden is going to propose to Briana today because she is his one true love, and then they're going to have perfect babies and live happily ever after."

"Are you sure, Ma?" My tone was skeptical. "Brayden's been banging Briana's half-sister, Hailey, as well as the neighbor with the big boobs."

"Yes, I'm sure," Ma nodded manically. "Those floozies were just a phase. He's grown up a lot since that episode last week, and I'm sure I just heard him swear his undying love to Briana." Ma's saucer-like eyes were glued to the screen as she slowly brought another handful of popcorn up to her mouth.

"Ma, he didn't just say that—"

"Yes, he did. Didn't you hear him?" Ma looked at me like I was a complete idiot.

"Uh huh," I murmured, somewhat disbelievingly. Ma had a tendency to lie about what had actually happened when I asked her for a catch-up on an episode.

She said it was because they spoke too fast, and her English wasn't good enough to keep up with what they were saying.

I thought, however, that she liked to have various unspoiled scenarios playing out in her mind. And in those scenarios, life was perfect: no one cheated, no one stole, and absolutely no one killed one another. As I'd

gotten older, I noticed that she also ignored all the ugly details in our own lives. This made-up world playing out in her mind was the complete opposite of her real life; however, her deliberate oblivion kept her seemingly happy.

As I watched the episode, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about Lorenzo.

He was tall, handsome, and powerful. The man could get it, and everyone knew it. But he was also arrogant and obnoxious—making him, most definitely, not my type.

Ma, as if sensing my thoughts, patted my hand. "Don't worry about your marriage. I hear he kills a good amount of men every month, so he'll be a husband you can be proud of. Your papà wouldn't marry you off to any stronzo."

"Gee, thanks Ma. That makes me feel so much better."

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That evening we were sitting around our dinner table: Me, Papà, Ma, Christian, Leoluca, Aunt Priscilla, and also my cousin Benny.

All talk was about the party and engagement contract signing tomorrow. The Italian Mafia was a traditional institution, and our families still followed the custom of signing an engagement contract. The marriage was a formal business arrangement between the Imperiosi and the Fratellanza, and I would be expected to sign the contract along with Lorenzo.

Christian turned to me. "I'm proud of you, Anni."

“What, for being obedient and marrying him?” I couldn’t help the glum note in my voice.

“Nah, for not killing him when you pulled the gun on him. Lorenzo Marchiano is an annoying fucker sometimes—you showed great restraint.”

“Yeah, well, if I was better at shooting running targets, then I wouldn’t have to be marrying him now.”

“Just don’t say anything at all during the party tomorrow, Annunciata,” ordered Ma. She was one of the few people who insisted on calling me by my full name. “That way, nothing will go wrong.”

Ma consulted the seating plan and then turned to my cousin, Benny. “Benny, you’ll be sitting opposite Annunciata at the party. If she talks, if she says absolutely anything, kick her.”

“Sure thing, Aunt Fantasia,” replied Benny. “Whatever you need, you can count on me.”

I sighed. I was sure I could get through one measly party without incident, but my parents appeared to be taking no chances.

CHAPTER 4

ANNUNCIATA

It was the day of the engagement party.

Before I had to play the role of a dutiful Mafia daughter tonight, I had most of the day free—and I intended to make the most of it.

I was due to play a game of tennis with friends, and I’d also planned to sneak over to my cousins’ house to watch the latest season of ‘Jersey

Shore’. My siblings and I had been forbidden from watching this, my parents fearing that we would be corrupted by the antics of the party-loving American-Italians on this reality show.

Ma’s biggest fear was that I’d turn into the opposite of what a good Mafia daughter should be: obedient, well-behaved, and demure. Ma most definitely didn’t know that I had secretly watched all the past seasons. Quite honestly, their lives, as portrayed on the show, looked relatively tame compared to what went on in my household.

LORENZO

I arrived in Staten Island. It was early evening, and the party wouldn’t start for another hour; however, I had arrived earlier than the rest of my family for the signing of the engagement contract.

Marco and some other members of our family would be arriving in about an hour. Clara and Clemente wouldn’t be here today—I wanted them to have some time to get used to the whole idea of the marriage before introducing them to Anni.

Napoleone greeted me in his mansion. “Welcome, Lorenzo. You’re right on time. I’ve got the engagement contract set out in the dining room, and it’s all ready for your and Anni’s signatures.”

I looked around and frowned. “Talking of the bride-to-be, where exactly is she?”

“She was spending the afternoon at the country club.” He gave a small frown. “She should have been back by now. No matter, I will get a soldier to show you to her, and you can both sign the contract in your own time.”

For fuck’s sake. The girl knew that we were signing the contract at five o’clock. Instead, I was having to go find her and drag her ass back to the house to get her fucking signature.

Her father didn’t even seem to care that his daughter had failed to show up on time for the contract signing. She seriously needed some discipline in her life—and I knew I would be the one to give it to her.

A soldier walked me to the clubhouse.

As we approached, I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting, but I certainly hadn’t expected to find her on the tennis courts, acting as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

She was wearing a pure white, sleeveless tennis dress, and her blonde hair was pulled into a short ponytail which bounced from side to side as she ran around the court.

Sweat glistened around her neck, and lean muscle flexed in her long legs as she stretched into a backhand.

I narrowed my eyes, not liking how she was dressed. The dress made her look virginal and was an unwelcome reminder of how much younger she was.

She was playing a doubles match with a young girl and two teenage boys. I felt my blood rush through my veins. What the fuck were those boys doing pissing around playing tennis? They should have been busy doing fight training or killing someone.

As Anni flew across the court and hit a forehand shot, the very short skirt of her white tennis dress flipped up, revealing her white lacy panties and the tempting curves of her ass.

And if I could see her ass, that meant that every other man here could see it as well—including the boys playing with her and the numerous soldiers

who were on guard duty. I had the unwelcome thought that being on guard duty at the clubhouse was a job the Imperiosi men probably fought over.

“Enjoying yourself?” I snapped, making her head whip around. “I’ve come to collect you to get ready for our engagement party.”

“Lorenzo.” Her face fell when she saw me, but noting my angry expression, she didn’t argue. She turned to her companions. “Sorry, guys. I have to go. But I’ll see you later at the party.”

She walked silently next to me as we made our way back to her parent’s house.

Trying to rein in my anger, I caught her upper arm, pulling her to an abrupt stop in front of me.

I gave her shoulder a caress with my fingers, tracing her skin through her sweat-dampened dress.

Feeling my hand on her body, she let out a rushed breath, her green eyes widening.

I raked my eyes slowly over her body. Her hair stuck to the back of her slender neck, beads of sweat trailing down her skin and disappearing into the front of her dress’s V-shaped neckline.

I dropped my eyes, taking in her tanned legs and pausing at the top of her bare, shapely thighs.

“You won’t wear that tennis dress ever again,” I gritted out. “Not unless you want me to spank your ass and then kill every man who looked at you.”

Her mouth gaped open. “Is this what my life is going to be like from now on—you dictating everything I can and can’t do? What am I supposed to wear when I play tennis?”

“Sweatpants and a hoodie,” I barked. I didn’t want any other Made Men ogling at my wife-to-be.

As soon as we arrived back in the house, she headed for the staircase. As she put her foot on the first step, she turned her face toward me. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I grabbed her wrist and yanked her back down the stairs, making her stumble toward me. “Not so fast. There’s still the matter of the contract you need to sign.”

The door of her father’s study was open, and I could see he was on the phone. But I wasn’t going to permit any further delays.

I put my hand against the small of her back and pushed her reluctant body, urging it toward the dining room where the contract lay waiting.

She looked over her shoulder, probably seeking out someone in her family who could get her out of this.

“Your father had agreed to this. There’s no way out.”

When she reached the table, I pulled out a chair, but she hesitated.

I pushed down firmly on her shoulders, forcing her to sit down at the antique table.

I stood behind her, my hands resting heavily on either side of her neck. I stooped down to be closer to her, inhaling the scent of her hair and noticing the damp tendrils that had escaped from her short ponytail.

I shoved the contract so that it was in front of her.

“Sign,” I ordered.

She looked around at me; meeting my eyes, she took a deep swallow and quickly turned back to the table in front of her. “Look, I’m sorry for what happened and for firing a gun at you,” she said slowly. “I understand that I shouldn’t have done what I did. So, there’s no need for you to insist on this marriage.”

My fingers tightened around the back of her neck. “There’s every point.”

Her eyes remained glued to the table and contract in front of her. “I’ve apologized, so why do you even still want to go ahead with this?”

I bent down so that my mouth was right next to her throat. “I don’t like being questioned.” My lips almost pressed against her ear, making her close her eyes tightly as if to protect herself from me. “You won’t question me again. You know, don’t you, what curiosity killed…?”

“…the cat?” she finished in a whisper, her breaths shallow.

“Exactly. I’m not a patient man. Now sign.”

Her slender fingers flexed as she picked up the pen.

After she had written her name in the required place, I reached into the pocket of my dark suit and pulled out a small, black velvet box. Flicking open the hinged lid, I took out the diamond engagement ring, which was nestled in the satin lining.

Taking her wrist, I pulled her to her feet and tugged her hand toward me. Feeling the rapid flutter of her pulse under my fingers, I pushed the ring onto her finger.

Her eyes stared down at it. She looked confused, as if not knowing how to feel or what to say. Then she snatched her hand back and stepped around me to make her escape.

Before she could leave, I lifted an arm and slammed my large hand against the doorframe, barring her exit from the room. I wasn’t finished with her yet. “You’re to wear it at all times and never take it off. You’re mine now.”

“I’m not a possession.”

I turned my body toward her and placed my free hand against the wall behind her, trapping her between my muscular arms. “Yes, you are. You’re mine to own, and that ring proves it.”

She exhaled and her heavy breaths filled the air as she pressed her back as far against the wall as she could, but there was nowhere for her to go. “I’ll have to take it off when I shower,” she retorted.

She watched my hand as I lifted it slowly to her face.

I caressed a thumb across her cheek and let my stare drop to her lips for a few long moments before flicking it back up to meet her eyes. “No, you won’t,” I said roughly. “When you’re naked, whether in the shower or under me in bed, I’ll still expect you to be wearing that ring.”

She scowled at me, despite the deep blush rushing up her face.

Letting my hands drop from the doorframe and her face, I finally allowed her to squeeze past me and hurry up the staircase. I’d gotten what I’d needed from her—for now, at least.

CHAPTER 5

ANNUNCIATA

I finally escaped up to my room.

My blood rushed through my veins, hating how he’d stood so close to me, all six feet and four inches of him towering above my body.

I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but I found his whole presence intimidating, my body heating uncomfortably every time he was close.

As I stood under the refreshing shower in my attached bathroom, I looked down at the large ring on my finger. I had almost taken it off with my other jewelry as I’d undressed, but then his command ran through my mind, and I’d left it on.

I told myself that the huge diamond was tacky. If I hadn't been so reluctant to marry, however, I might have been able to admit that the design of the ring was, in fact, gorgeous, the shape of the Asscher-cut diamond lending a vintage look to it.

After shampooing my hair and washing my body, I got out of the shower and wrapped my white robe around me. As I stepped into my bedroom, a knock sounded at my door.

I opened it—to find Lorenzo standing there.

His large frame took an uninvited step into my room, making me take a hasty step backward.

"You can't be in here." My voice came out hoarsely as I tightened the belt of my robe and retreated to the other side of my bed. "It's not appropriate."

He ignored me, prowling further into my bedroom, taking a good look around himself.

I licked my dry lips. "I'll scream," I threatened.

"Your papà gave me his permission to be here so long as the door stays open. You're my fiancée now, so you're mine." His voice dripped with authority and dominance.

The air grew thicker, and the walls closed in around me. My bedroom suddenly seemed too small with him in the room. I didn't know what he wanted, and I couldn't get any more words out as he stalked across to the bed.

His gaze on me was heavy, burning my skin as his eyes coasted from my wet hair down to my bare legs and feet.

A shiver skated down my spine. I didn't know why his presence was so unnerving.

“I told him I would be confiscating this,” he drawled, picking up my tennis dress from my bed. “Although I think I’ll also take this and this,” he smirked, picking up my discarded panties and bra, and running his fingers thoughtfully over the white lace.

Jesus, he’d just run his fingers over my panties.

I took a step toward him and tried to snatch them back from him, but he held them out of my reach.

He had a complete lack of boundaries, and his very presence was suffocating me. Trying to hide how flustered I was, I turned away from him and sat down at my vanity, picking up my hairbrush.

As I dragged the brush through my wet strands, my hand shook, and I prayed to God that he wouldn’t notice.

Lorenzo silently came up behind me. He was wearing a fitted black suit, white dress shirt, and black tie. His clothes had been tailored to be a perfect fit for his tall, muscular body.

I held my breath as he lifted his fingers and ran them slowly over my hair. His lazy touch made my body flinch and my scalp tighten.

“Relax,” he breathed, a low sound of satisfaction rumbling from him as his rough fingers trailed from my hair down the side of my damp throat, leaving a hot trail burning along my skin.

In the reflection of the mirror, I couldn’t help watching his large, tanned hands, noticing how they led to strong wrists with a dusting of dark hair that disappeared into the sleeve of his dress shirt.

His touch was intimate—too intimate—and I felt a shiver run through me.

Every stare from him was too hot and too heavy. Heat ran up my neck and I couldn’t breathe. His proximity was stealing the air from my lungs.

“I like a woman to have long hair.” His voice was smooth and smoky like a fine whiskey. “You won’t have enough time to grow it by the wedding next month. You’ll have to get hair extensions put in.”

“Hair extensions?” I managed to get out. “I don’t think so. Absolutely no way.” I wasn’t going to look like a blow-up Barbie doll for him or any other man.

His eyes caught mine in the reflection, his gaze like a predator who had just snared his prey. “You are my fiancée now. You’ve signed the contract, giving yourself over to me. You’ll do as I say—even if I have to drag you kicking and screaming to the salon.”

My mouth gaped open. “If you make me get extensions, I’ll shave my head before the wedding,” I shot back at him.

I smiled to myself, knowing that I’d got the last word in.

Then he replied…“I want your hair long enough to wrap around my fist when you’re in bed with me…”

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